DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 908 TM 009 494

AUTHOR Frahm, Robert; Covington, Jimmie
TITLE What's Happening in Minimum Competency Testing.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa, Bloomington, Ind.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 59p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, Indiana 47402 ($2.50 plus $1.00 handling fee on orders less than $5.00)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Administrator Attitudes; Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Graduation Requirements; *Minimum Competency Testing; Parent Attitudes; Performance Based Education; Public Opinion; Public School Systems; *State Legislation; *State Programs; Student Opinion; Teacher Attitudes; *Testing Problems; *Testing Programs

ABSTRACT

An examination of the current status of minimum competency testing is presented in a series of short essays, which discuss case studies of individual school systems and state approaches. Sections are also included on the viewpoints of critics and supporters, teachers and teacher organizations, principals and students, and the federal government. Minimum competency testing programs in Gary, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; Omaha, Nebraska; St. Paul, Minnesota; Oregon, and Bakersfield, California are discussed. State laws and regulations for Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, New York, Arizona, Nevada, Tennessee, and Kentucky, are explained. General conclusions are reached: (1) the major strength of minimum competency testing programs is the identification of specific learning objectives, especially in the elementary grades; (2) the effect of high school graduation tests is unclear; (3) the full impact of the programs is uncertain; and (4) the effect of emphasizing basic skills upon below-average students and high-achieving students is as yet unanswered. (MH)

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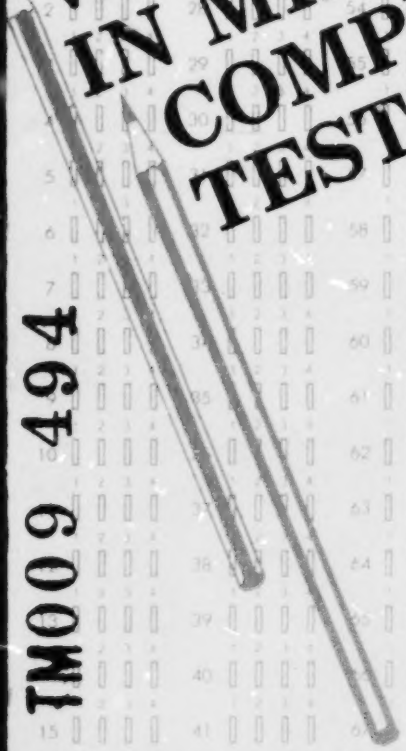
WHAT'S HAPPENING IN MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING



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INTRODUCTION BY
Chris Pipho

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What's Happening in Minimum Competency Testing

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Bloomington, Indiana

Cover design: Vaheh Shirinian

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 79-88140
ISBN 0-87367-768-4
Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

by **Chris Pipho**
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In 1976 what is now known as minimum competency testing began to be mandated by state legislation or by state board of education policy statements. At first, it was known as a competency-based high school graduation testing program. Since 1976, however, the movement has evolved from simply a high school graduation testing mandate to an early warning test system for identifying students needing remedial assistance. Many states now require a competency test or a minimum competency assurance at one or more grades at the elementary, junior high, or senior high school levels.

Today there are 36 states that have taken either legislative or state board action to mandate that schools, on a statewide basis, identify the minimum basic or life skills that students should attain during elementary and secondary school. While 36 states have taken some form of action, all of the rest have studied the issue through a legislative interim study, a state board of education task force, or some other form of study group or commission.

A majority of the states require that high school graduation be based on passing a minimum competency test. New Mexico and Idaho have a local option that is applicable to portions of their testing program. Local districts that do use the state test may give a high school diploma with a state board seal affixed. None of these states, with the exception of the Florida and California early exit programs, has removed any of the traditional carnegie unit or course requirements for high school graduation.

In 1979 eight states introduced minimum competency legislation, but none of the bills has yet been enacted. In some cases, these pending bills modify programs already in existence. For example, in Colorado SB 153 would have mandated a test at every grade level, superseding a program, that called for local districts to follow only certain standards if they wished to have a competency testing program for high school graduation. In Tennessee pending legislation would rescind the high school graduation portion of the present mandate. In other states such as Arizona and Indiana, bills similar to ones introduced in previous years again have been introduced, but none has yet been enacted.

In two states, Minnesota and Wisconsin, the state superintendent of public instruction or the state board of education has announced that the issue is not a state problem but is one for local districts to solve with the assistance of the states. Presumably, there will be no statewide mandate in these states.

At the beginning of the 1979 legislative sessions, several states experienced leadership changes. In Wyoming and Tennessee, new chief state school officers, not sympathetic with minimum competency rules enacted prior to their taking office, have assumed control. It remains to be seen if the state board ruling enacted in Wyoming in late 1977 will be rescinded or if the Tennessee testing program will be modified.

While changes of leadership can potentially change policy direction, the court challenges to minimum competency testing now pending in Florida and North Carolina may hold more potential for change. Hearings in the Florida court case are expected to be completed prior to the end of the 1979 school year. A similar case pending in North Carolina is also nearing its conclusion. It is expected that these lower court decisions will be appealed no matter which side wins.

In the spring of 1979, it would appear that interest in minimum competency testing at the state policy level has lessened. Most of the concern is now being directed to implementation by state departments of education or school districts. However, since the competency testing movement has never had a large measure of support from educators, those who were opposed to the mandates prior to enactment now have directed their efforts to modifying the implementation programs. Debate over the need for minimum competency testing seems to be lessening. The key issues now seem to be remedial programs, the cost of such remediation programs, the possibility of discrimination against certain minority students or special education students, and the need for teacher inservice training and better instructional materials.

While the programs being implemented are unique to each state, they all have much in common. Writing goal statements in the basic skill subject areas, field testing assessment items, and designing remedial programs are common tasks undertaken by states and local school districts.

In California the law calls for the state department of education to prepare sample goal statements and sample test items for local school districts to use. Several volumes of implementation manuals have been produced. In Massachusettes three statewide teacher task forces have worked on the criteria to be used in developing the goal statements in mathematics, reading, and writing. In general, most other state departments of education and local school districts have gone through similar processes or are about to do so.

Because of the rapid development of the minimum competency testing movement, inservice workshops on implementation problems and the evaluation of programs are popular with local school districts and state officials. The most frequently asked questions are: Is it successful? How has the program changed instruction? What are the implementation problems? While these questions are easily asked, answers are not readily available. Very few people have had the opportunity to visit in depth with local school districts and state departments implementing these programs. A few people have attended workshops where local district people have described their programs or reviewed some of their materials. Again, no careful analysis has been made of the implementation problems and processes.

The two reports presented here by Robert Frahm and Jimmie Covington are based on nearly three months of visiting states and local school districts implementing the programs while they served as Ford Foundation Fellows in Educational Journalism. They are both seasoned journalists specializing in education. What they have written is probably the most comprehensive probe of minimum competency testing to date. Frahm's observation that no one seems to be evaluating what they're doing or even creating an evaluating process is particularly pertinent. Through the questions they asked and the observations they made as they visited with state and local officials, you will have an opportunity to formulate your own opinion about the minimum competency testing movement.

Chris Pipho
March 1979

Part I

Minimum Competency Testing: Views From The Field

by Robert Frahm
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Competency Testing: Some Questions

None too optimistic about her prospects, Debbie Dean nonetheless shows up early at lecture hall 116, grabs a seat in the front row, and waits for directions she has heard before.

"Where it says course, put down consumerism," says a teacher's aide. "Consumerism is c-o-n-s-u-m-e-r-i-s-m."

"I've taken it five times," says Debbie, a 17-year-old senior at Westside High School in Omaha, Nebraska. "I just can't learn it. I want to graduate at semester. I want out."

Before she gets out, however, Debbie, like students in cities such as Chicago; Denver; Gary, Indiana; or Bakersfield, California, faces something that is becoming a familiar graduation requirement, the minimum competency test.

Faced with mounting criticism of graduates, schools are demanding that students demonstrate they can do such things as balance a checkbook, solve simple math problems, write a paragraph, or read at a sixth-grade level.

As reasonable as that may sound (Who can argue a graduate should n't be competent?), the idea raises questions that could trouble schools as much as the consumer exam troubles Debbie Dean. In fact, minimum competency testing already has led to lawsuits in Florida and North Carolina. Elsewhere, it stirs debate between ardent backers and hard-line critics. Chris Pipho, a researcher with the Denver-based Education Commission of the States (ECS) who has been monitoring the competency testing movement says, "I don't know of anyone in the last two years who's changed his mind on this issue."

Critics and supporters alike, however, apparently agree on the sources of the competency testing trend. It comes in the wake of rising school costs, reports of declines in student achievement, and public criticism of high school graduates. In a 1978 Gallup Poll, 49% of those surveyed gave public schools a grade of C or worse, compared with 32% in 1974. By a more than 2-1 margin, the public in the same poll favored promoting children from grade to grade only if they can pass examinations.

It is hardly surprising, then, that minimum competency testing, something that seemed a startling idea just a few years ago in places like Florida and Oregon, spread rapidly. According to ECS's Pipho, 36 states now require minimum competence standards in some form. In addition, local districts like Omaha, Gary, and Bakersfield have set their own standards.

The trend signals a loss of faith in schools, said George Weber, associate director of the Council for Basic Education in Washington, D.C. "You can't assume a person who got a passing grade in a math course can do math," he

said. "You can't assume a person who got a passing grade in a typing course can type. In other words, we have schools without standards."

If so, is competency testing the answer? Skeptics abound. Said Arthur Wise of the Rand Corporation in Washington, D.C., "I would grant education has become somewhat soft in recent years, but I think we as a nation are well on the way to repairing the softness without competency testing .... It's like a cheap fix."

With most states not scheduled to start competency programs until the 1980s, educators have turned to some of the early starters – Gary, Denver, Bakersfield, Omaha, and Oregon – for hints on the future of competency testing. But even in those places the evidence is skimpy, and questions remain.

First, what is competence?

"One of the real problems of the whole competency movement is the definition of the term," said Robert Gourley of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland. Indeed, what passes for competence differs sharply from one school system to another:

– In Gary, Denver, and Bakersfield, schools focus competency tests on basics – reading, writing, and math. Gary also includes a speech test, while Denver tests spelling.

– In Chicago, students won't get out of eighth grade until they master 80% of 273 reading skills covering such things as pronunciation and phonetics.

– In Florida, students must pass statewide functional literacy tests that apply communication and math skills to everyday problems.

– In Oregon's Lincoln County, schools list 243 minimum skills, including some like this: "Form ... hypotheses about urban locations and growth, patterns of land use, urban socio-economic characteristics, urban size and spacing, and use theories to account for settlement and land-use patterns."

– In Omaha, a student demonstrates competence by writing three paragraphs with no more than five errors. Albany, Oregon, requires a 100-word essay, allowing up to five errors in spelling, three in capitalization, and three in punctuation. In Denver, a student takes a multiple-choice test on grammar and punctuation.

– In St. Paul, students collect letters, testimony, and even telegrams attesting to their competence in real-life situations like finding a job or doing community work.

Sometimes the requirements seem questionable. Albany, Oregon, schools once required students to "maintain personal cleanliness," a goal students met by taking showers 80% of the time after physical education class.

Some critics suggest schools delude themselves by trying to identify what skills are required to function competently. "Can anybody say, indeed, that skills of this level are what are required to be a truck driver or engineer?" said Gene Glass, director of the Laboratory of Educational Research at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Gordon Cawelti, executive director of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in Washington, D.C., said, "The competency movement is saying, 'What is an educated person?' You've had people do that intellectual exercise for a long time, starting with Socrates."

Second, how high should a minimum be?

Gordon McAndrew, superintendent of schools in Gary, sums up the dilemma: "If you don't fail some students, have you raised the standard? If you

fail too many, is it politically acceptable?"

Neither Gary nor anyone else has denied many diplomas so far. Gary schools, for instance, rejected 22 seniors out of about 4,800 graduates in 1977 and 1978. Denver officials estimate 1.5 to 2% of the senior class fails. Omaha's Westside High School denied diplomas to four students out of 1,600 seniors during the last two years. In Oregon, Gordon Ascher, associate superintendent of the state education department says, "We don't know of a single instance where someone failed because of competencies." Actually, there are scattered instances, but most schools are apparently like those in Albany, Oregon, where none of last spring's 550 seniors failed the tests.

Many competency tests are rated about a sixth- or seventh-grade level, prompting skeptics to contend they are too easy. "If you can't pass that," said a Denver senior, "you have the IQ of an artichoke." A Parkrose, Oregon, remedial reading teacher said, "Too often, students feel minimum and maximum mean the same thing. Once they've got that, that's the end." And Joe Nathan, a former administrator at the St. Paul Open School, contends that the low standards could backfire. "People will say they're paying for 12 years of education and getting seven or eight."

Ralph Tyler, a distinguished educator and researcher who chaired a study panel that wrote a report criticizing the Florida competency testing plan, said the setting of a single minimum standard makes no sense. "It is as bad for the public to decide these things in detail as it is for the public to decide how doctors should cure cancer. The decision varies with the individual patient."

Third, is competency testing legal?

The Florida and North Carolina lawsuits are the only ones so far, but Merle McClung, a lawyer with the Center for Law and Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts, thinks others are likely. In Tampa, 10 black students contend the test examines skills they were never taught, is not a reliable instrument, and unfairly penalizes black students who spent earlier years in segregated schools. In North Carolina, plantiffs allege the state testing program excludes blacks, poor whites, and Indians from the job market. Said McClung: "We've had literally hundreds of requests for our articles dealing with the legal implications, from school districts and from attorneys."

Fourth, how does competency testing affect curriculum?

The answer remains unclear, although critics like the Rand Corporation's Wise fear statewide tests could lead schools to teach for basic skills only, thereby sacrificing things like science, history, or music. "What you do is cause local school people to become obsessed with the test. The desire to bring about good performance on the test will drive out the rest of the curriculum."

Even at the local level, educators worry that teachers might focus their instruction too narrowly – that is, teach for the tests. Gary Superintendent McAndrew admits there is danger of abuse and says some elementary schools had suspiciously high scores on basic skills progress tests, but he said the problem does not appear to be serious.

Teachers in some districts make another complaint: Competency testing produces mountains of paperwork and takes too much time. "It's a testing program, not a learning tool," said an Albany, Oregon, social studies teacher. "All our effort goes into pushing them over that hurdle . . . . We haven't changed teaching techniques, introduced any new theories, provided any new avenues for students to pick up skills."

Despite predictions of a narrowing curriculum, there is little evidence of that so far. Denver schools, for example, list 954 junior high and high school courses. Parkrose, Oregon, schools report increasing enrollment in advanced math and science courses since competency testing began.

Perhaps the most profound curriculum changes have occurred in Chicago schools under a promotion policy requiring eighth-graders to master 80% of 273 reading skills listed in a program called Continuous Progress/Mastery Learning (CPML). Administrators say the policy identifies and helps youngsters who have unusual difficulty, but some teachers complain about the amount of paperwork. Said one teacher: "I had to change my whole method .... (Students) are spending their time filling out ditto forms on pronunciation, phonetics, parts of speech, rather than reading a story for enjoyment." Caris Nugent, director of the Citizens Schools Committee, a school watchdog group, fears schools may become obsessed with testing "Parents say my kid reads at 5.3 (fifth grade, third month), not my kid just finished *Charlotte's Web*."

Finally, does competency testing improve schools?

"I don't think there is any doubt about it. The answer is yes," say backers like the Council for Basic Education's Weber. On the other side are skeptics like University of Colorado researcher Glass: "They (competence tests) are of no value at all to teachers, no value to the kids."

But what evidence is there? Solid research is scarce. Some schools have incomplete data; others have none.

In Denver, where the Proficiency and Review (P&R) test has been given for 16 years, officials have done no research on whether the tests improve the caliber of high schoolers, according to Allan Hosler, supervisor of testing. "We didn't collect data then (16 years ago) the way we do now," he said. But Hosler said the P&R test was not designed to improve achievement. "The purpose was to guarantee to business and industry our diploma would have some validity." However, even though the P&R grew out of a 1958 survey that found local businesses dissatisfied with the caliber of graduates, Denver schools stopped conducting such surveys in the early 1960s.

Oregon, the first state to venture into competency testing, also has little data, said Gordon Ascher, associate superintendent in the Oregon Department of Education. "Nobody bothered a few years back to set up an evaluation design," said Ascher. "We never said what problems the program was intended to cure." Ascher hopes for some results in early 1979 from a University of Oregon study, but he said it will be difficult even then to draw conclusions because few districts gathered information about graduates prior to competency testing.

Occasionally, schools cite unusual data. In Parkrose, Oregon, for instance, schools point to a rise in scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) since competency tests began. But whether the SAT, a college entrance exam, indicates success with a minimum skills program is questionable. Similarly, Gary administrators are fond of citing figures showing a 73% passing rate last year for seniors taking the U.S. Steel Corporation's apprenticeship examination, compared to a 42% rate in 1971. What the administrators don't say is that the passing rate was up to 65% in 1973, a year before Gary's competency program was proposed.

Gary schools, however, also are watching seniors' scores on a national standardized test. The results are mixed, with reading and math scores rising between 1974 and 1977, then falling in 1978.

At least two districts have done before-and-after tests of competency programs, hoping to rate their effectiveness. In Omaha, Westside High School assistant principal James Findley gave Westside's tests to a sampling of 1976 seniors, hoping to compare results with those of 1977 seniors, the first to graduate under the school's requirements. Findley's project is not finished. The Kern High School District in Bakersfield, California, gave its reading and math competency tests to random samples of seniors both before and after competency testing began. The result: Seniors under the new requirements scored either the same as or slightly lower than those not under the requirement.

One of the most frequently cited arguments in favor of competency testing is that it identifies and assists students who need help. But Margaret Silberberg, a Minneapolis psychologist who has studied research on remedial reading, raises a troubling point: "We have no evidence at all (that) remediation helps." Although students made short-term gains, she said, "when we'd go back six months later we found they were right back where they started. . . . Certain remedial programs teach kids to take tests, but as far as enhancing academic skills, they don't work.

"Competency testing to me has an analogy that could be used with height – who's average, who's above and below. You say the kids who are below average you're going to stretch. The presumption is you can tutor them into being above average . . . .

"It's a spurious kind of situation, but it's one that sells. Nobody does a follow-up to find out what the hell it did."

Still, remedial work is "the great hidden cost in competency-based programs," according to a National Institute of Education (NIE) study by Barry Anderson of Washington University in St. Louis. According to Anderson, the State of Washington estimates costs of up to $94 million for reading and math programs. Michigan, meanwhile, will spend $31 million this year, Florida $26 million, and New Jersey $68 million for remedial programs.

Some local programs, too, have high price tags. By one estimate, the 36,000-student Gary district will spend $1 million this year. In Racine, Wisconsin, the 25,000-student district budgeted $892,000 for the 1978-79 minimum standards program.

Districts like Racine and Gary, however, are putting some of their money into remedial programs at elementary and junior high schools, a move favored by many educators, including Ernest Boyer, U.S. Commissioner of Education. "There's a lot of evidence the teaching of reading and writing is becoming a top priority, and I think that's good," said Boyer. "Students should be assessed in the first few grades to determine if they are mastering fundamentals, as contrasted to measuring students in eleventh or twelfth grade and dropping an evaluation time bomb on them at a time when the possibility for remediation is all but lost."

Critics and supporters alike agree that competency testing has one beneficial effect: It forces schools to look at what they have been doing. Although NIE researcher William Spady believes competency testing has done little to reform education, he says it has, at least, led to specific teaching goals, something many schools have lacked. "You could go into classroom after classroom and not discover what it is teachers are teaching, or why, and they are not sure," he said.

However, if educators and citizens do examine their schools, they will find nothing terribly simple about them, not even the assumption that undergirds the competency movement – that student achievement is declining.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), one of the most frequently cited reports on student achievement, gives a mixed picture. In a 1974 writing survey and a 1975 reading survey, the NAEP found that 13- and 17-year-old students wrote worse paragraphs and made less accurate inferences from what they read than did their predecessors four years earlier. However, 9-year-olds in the same surveys improved in both reading and writing. In addition, 13- and 17-year-olds did no worse on "literal comprehension" skills in 1975 than 1971, and 17-year-olds actually improved their performance on NAEP's functional literacy test.

Schools, however, take little comfort in scattered achievement increases, particularly in light of declines on other tests, including the SAT. A panel commissioned to examine the SAT scores found much of the decline between 1963 and 1970 could be attributed to changing population seeking admission to college. However, the panel found the declines continued after 1970, even though the test-taking population stabilized.

Concern over the apparent drop in student achievement is widespread. Senator George McGovern has proposed the creation of a National Commission on Literacy, saying that if illiteracy remains unchecked, "an already deteriorating situation will become an educational disaster and a national disgrace." Among other things, the federal government "should formulate optional national criteria for competency testing," McGovern said.

Given the evidence from the SAT, NAEP, and other tests, "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that students over age 10 or 11 are in fact learning less than they once did in the areas that schools have traditionally emphasized," wrote Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks in *Working Papers* magazine.

But Jencks and others wonder whether competency testing misses the problem by emphasizing basic, low-level skills, when surveys like NAEP show that students have more serious problems with high-level skills, such as understanding an author's main idea.

"We must find ways of motivating students to go beyond the basics," Jencks writes. "We must convince them that knowledge is really worth acquiring and that systematic, rigorous thought is superior to intuition. This is not a matter of establishing 'minimum standards.' It is a matter of creating respect for 'maximum standards'."

NAEP Director Roy Forbes concurs, saying minimum competency testing may be focusing on skills that are too basic. "It's a complex issue," said Forbes, "and people looking for simple answers don't like to hear the complex questions."

Seven Case Studies

Gary: A Focus on Basics

Like a rocky, treacherous path, the paragraph loomed before him.

"Can . . . old . . . people . . . do . . . important . . . work . . . ." He treaded slowly, kicking the first words, like small stones, out of his way one at a time. The terrain got rougher.

"At eighty-nine, Michelangelo painted some of his finest canvasses . . ." the paragraph continued. His voice barely audible, the youth stepped past "Michelangelo," stumbling on "painted" (he said "pointed"), and halted at "canvasses."

Teacher Vera Hooper rolled that one out of the way for him. He continued haltingly, wringing his hands under the table, sometimes bobbing his head toward the page, as if to shake a reluctant word off his tongue.

The youth, a 16-year-old sophomore at Lew Wallace High School, reads at about a fourth- or fifth-grade level, said Hooper. He wound up in Hooper's remedial class because he failed a reading test given to all high school students in this steel mill town.

He will take the test again . . . and again . . . if he has to. But if he doesn't pass it eventually, he won't graduate. That is the rule now in Gary, one of the first cities in the country to deny diplomas on the basis of academic tests. Gary schools turned down six seniors in 1977 who failed reading or mathematics tests and 16 seniors in 1978 who failed reading, math, or writing tests. By 1980 seniors also must pass a speech test.

"In the past, they knew they could graduate and not learn anything. The only thing they had to do was show up," said Donald Henderson, an administrative assistant in the 36,000-student district. "We have put a stop to that."

Whether Gary schools have, in fact, stopped turning out incompetent graduates is a matter for debate. The tests themselves, designed by local educators and rated about the sixth-grade level, draw some skeptics.

"I don't see where they really prepare a child to take his place in the adult world," said Marie Jernigan, chairman of the Gary NAACP's Education Committee. "What is a child qualified to do with sixth-grade skills?"

Still, the project is an ambitious one. By one estimate, the program this year will cost $1 million, much of it for remedial teachers and classes at elementary, middle, and high schools. Up to 2,000 – one out of four – tenth- through twelfth-graders are enrolled in remedial classes, school officials estimate. Tests also are given to second-, fifth-, and seventh-graders.

Starting in June, 1979, sixth-graders who fail the fifth-grade tests and seventh-graders who fail the sixth-grade tests, will be held back a grade.

All of this, school officials hope, will begin raising achievement in a district where the average senior in 1974 read at a grade level of 8.6 (eighth grade, sixth month) on the Stanford Test of Basic Skills. Ten percent of the 1974 class read below the sixth-grade level, the test showed.

Later results are mixed. Gary seniors hit a 9.8 reading average in 1977, but fell to 9.0 in 1978. The math average jumped from 9.0 in 1974 to 9.6 in 1977, then back to 9.0. There is one bright spot: The proportion of seniors reading below sixth-grade level fell to 6% in 1977 and stayed at that mark in 1978.

The evidence is scanty, at best, because the program is so new. But even without solid data, the plan appears to be popular. Proponents contend Gary's tests motivate slow or lazy students. "They come in and check when the next test is going to be," said Eunice Hobbs, basic skills coordinator at Roosevelt High School. "They say, 'I'm poor in fractions' or 'my punctuation is bad.' You never heard that before."

Students apparently find little difficulty clearing up such problems. Critics point to the small numbers of diplomas denied out of graduating classes of 2,400 students. "If I take the same test five times, pretty soon I'm going to remember which ones I got wrong the first time," said Sandra Irons, president of the Gary Teachers Union.

School officials counter by saying failing more students not only would cost more money for remedial classes, but might anger parents.

"It's one of the fascinating questions," said Gordon McAndrew, Gary's superintendent of schools. "If you don't fail some students, have you raised the standard? If you fail too many, is it politically acceptable?"

That is not the only question, however. Will students view the test as a maximum, not a minimum, goal? Said high school reading teacher Daisy Fields "After the test is over, it's hard to get them to do anything . . . . It's hard for me to get them to understand they should read for themselves, not for the test." Fields said teachers and students put too much emphasis on the test, a test she has doubts about. "I've had people at a third-grade level pass the test . . . . I've had some of my good ones fail it."

Will teachers become obsessed with the test, focusing on it at the expense of other subjects? McAndrew admits there is danger of abuse and said some elementary schools had suspiciously high test scores, but he said the problem does not appear to be serious.

Will Gary graduates be better prepared for work? Administrators are fond of citing figures showing a 73% passing rate in 1977 for seniors taking the U.S. Steel Corporation's apprenticeship examination, compared with a 42% rate in 1971.

What the administrators don't say is that the passing rate was up to 65% in 1973, a year before the Gary's competency program was proposed. A U.S. Steel spokesman said there has been no appreciable change in scores since Gary's competency program began.

Will test results be used to rate teachers? Administrators and the Gary Teachers Union insist this won't happen. School board member Dr. Ruth Taylor doesn't agree. "I think teachers should be under the same microscope," she said.

Can schools legally deny diplomas on the basis of one test? In Gary, no lawsuits – so far. But, said McAndrew, "The first kid who's got a half dozen

basketball scholarships waiting (and) who's denied a diploma will create an explosion."

Despite such questions, Gary officials remain enthusiastic and are working on a plan called Competency 2, a project that will require students, starting in 1982, to pass tests in one of five areas: academics, fine arts, business, practical arts, and technical studies. Even more than the current program, the Competency 2 project is likely to prompt a review of curriculum, a process that can be a healthy one.

In the meantime, the tests continue to stir debate. "You don't even have to be smart not even average (to pass the test)," said one junior. But a 19-year-old senior, who failed the math test twice, said the remedial course has helped. "I'm getting pretty good at math," he said. "I'm showing other folks how to do it now."

Chicago: Reading Skills, An Eighth-Grade Hurdle

The news hit 13-year-old April just as it hit thousands of other eighth-graders last spring. "All the rest of my friends were going to ninth grade and I wasn't. I felt upset," said April, now 14 and still at McCorkle Elementary School.

From McCorkle in the heart of Chicago's South Side to Ogden School near the Loop to Sauganash School on the wealthy North Side, eighth-graders – about 15,000 of them or one out of every three – found out their reading scores were too low to allow them into high school.

Unlike April, who had moved to Mississippi during the summer, some of those 15,000 attended summer classes in an effort to raise their scores enough for a ticket to high school. About three out of four succeeded.

Until last spring, Chicago's unofficial policy was to move youngsters to the next level without regard to specific standards, some officials admit.

"No longer does everyone win and everyone get a prize like Alice in Wonderland," said Angeline Caruso, associate superintendent for instructional services.

At the heart of Chicago's new policy is a 1977 board of education ruling that requires eighth-graders to master 80% of 273 reading skills listed in a program called Continuous Progress/Mastery Learning (CPML).

Under CPML, an elementary school does not consider a child to be a third-grader or fourth-grader, for example, but measures her instead by the number of skills she has mastered. Each of the 273 skills is taught, then measured by a test, and marked on a student's progress chart – a process that some teachers and principals claim results in "attacks of paperwork."

Although CPML was a pilot program more than a decade ago, a number of schools paid little attention to it until last spring, when the new promotion policy threatened graduation ceremonies.

Eighth-graders, however, aren't the only ones whose graduation parties might be canceled. Starting in the spring of 1979, Chicago high school graduates will be required to pass a minimum skills, urban living test that asks them to do such things as read a want ad or interpret a telephone bill. Officials predict privately that as many as 1,000 of the city's 30,000 potential graduates might be denied diplomas. "It's going to be bloody," said one.

But the focus in Chicago appears to be on elementary schools. "You can't just wait until kids get to be seniors and tell them you'll give them a test to see if they graduate," said Caruso. "It's like waiting to tell them they've got terminal cancer."

Because of the constant testing and reporting required under CPML, youngsters who have unusual difficulty can be spotted early, perhaps even assigned to special education classes long before the ultimate step of denying eighth-grade diplomas, said Caruso. Officials also hope CPML will create tougher, more uniform standards throughout the school system, even in poor neighborhoods.

"Poverty is never an excuse for lack of achievement," said Alice Blair, superintendent of the South Side's District 13, the home of McCorkle School with some of the lowest reading scores in the city.

Blair gained a measure of notoriety herself by holding back low-achieving students even before the systemwide policy was adopted. Blair's approach also includes insistence on parent involvement, strict discipline and dress codes, and constant visits to classrooms by supervisors. Blair's iron-fisted approach, and perhaps her notoriety, stir at least a trace of resentment among some officials.

"Any stupid administrator can flunk a kid," said Caruso. "The point is, what do you do about him?" What Chicago schools do, said Caruso, is this: They provide additional tutors, put extra reading teachers in schools whose scores are lowest, keep close track of teaching materials, and provide reading labs at high school for students who still have low scores even after being held back a year.

The changes already are showing signs of success, said John Wick, director of research for Chicago schools. Wick points to a slight upturn in the city's average reading score for 13-year-olds – from 6.6 in 1975 to 7.1 in 1978 on one national standardized test.

Officials see the promotion policy as mandating a strong element of teacher accountability. Said Caruso "This makes the best teachers and the worst teachers more visible, and that's good." Whether the promotion policy makes students, teachers, and principals work harder is a question that remains to be answered. There are skeptics.

Failing eighth-graders doesn't solve anything, said Billie Paige, a member of the board of the Citizens Schools Committee (CSC), a school watchdog group. "What they're saying is you're going to make that up in the same school system you failed in. Never does anyone blame the school system."

Chris Nugent, CSC executive director, fears schools may become obsessed with testing. "Parents say my kid reads at 5.3, not my kid just finished *Charlotte's Web.*"

One teacher complains: "I had to change my whole method . . . . (Students) are spending their time filling out ditto forms on pronunciation, phonetics, parts of speech rather than reading a story for enjoyment. I don't know whether I'm doing a better job or not. I know I'm filling out a lot of forms."

Still, the promotion policy has won some backers. "I'm the type of person that if you put pressure on me I'll work harder," said another teacher. "It should have been done a long time ago."

Denver: The Granddaddy

Even though she hopes to sing at graduation, Duronda Williams might find the ceremony an empty one, all because of a mathematics test she hasn't been able to pass so far. "That's the heaviest thing on your mind," the Thomas Jefferson High School senior said of a graduation requirement that dates back to 1962 – the year of the Cuban missile crisis, John Glenn's orbital space flight, and Duronda's second birthday.

In many American schools, basic skills testing arrived recently, but Denver Public Schools boast a program that may be the granddaddy of competency tests, a granddaddy some critics suggest is creaking with age. Called the Proficiency and Review (P&R) test, the exam began after schools surveyed local businesses in 1958, and found that businesses complained some graduates couldn't spell, do math, or even fill out sales slips. "We just hopped on the bandwagon earlier than anyone else," said one school official.

So, after nearly two decades, what have Denver schools learned? The answer is not clear. Said William Dean, assistant commissioner in the Colorado Department of Education: "Nowhere can I get anyone to tell me . . . . Maybe it's just institutionalized, and they don't know how to change it."

Administrators in the 68,000-student system defend the P&R, a multiple-choice test covering reading, math, language, and spelling. "No youngster can occupy a chair, bore a teacher to death, get a D-minus, and graduate," said Allen Hosler, supervisor of testing.

Once given to twelfth-graders, the test was moved back to ninth grade in the early 1970s, giving students more chances to pass it and allowing more time for remedial help, one benefit of P&R, according to Hosler.

Still, several questions arise. One of the most frequent is whether the test is too easy. Administrators rate it about an eighth-grade level, but some contend it is easier. Only 1.5 to 2% of the senior class is denied diplomas each year. "If you can't pass that, you have the IQ of an artichoke," said one senior.

Even so, nearly half of the 1978 ninth-graders failed each part of the test after two tries. In the past, the pressure to pass more students led to cheating at some schools, alleges Stirling Cooper, a former researcher who was transferred to a teaching job after he publicly criticized testing practices.

At one high school, "we had evidence someone was erasing answers and putting correct ones in," said Cooper. Officials deny those charges. A self-styled gadfly, Cooper called the test "Our primary tool for lying to the public . . . . (Schools) use the P&R to say things are in good shape and getting better."

Despite those allegations, the P&R has run into no organized opposition except for an unsuccessful attempt in the Colorado legislature to abolish the test in 1975. That attempt, however, did lead to a law requiring schools to offer immediate remedial help to those who fail competency tests.

Does Denver's test lead to such help? Consider Duronda Williams. She failed the math test three times, but said she didn't get any help until a tutor got in touch with her this fall.

Although many P&R failures are assigned to remedial or low-level courses, those classes are not directly tied to the P&R, and officials will not guarantee a student who fails the test will wind up there. In fact, Duronda was assigned

to three algebra classes in ninth and tenth grades, getting Ds in each one. She failed geometry in eleventh grade.

State Senator Regis Groff, author of the 1975 law, said Duronda should have had remedial classes or tutors every semester after she failed the test. "If she hasn't had that, the district is in violation of the law."

At Jefferson, seniors like Duronda get help from tutor Jeannie Lewis. Some schools, however, don't have such tutors, and Lewis said the only instructions she got when she started the job this year came from a secretary. "They've been giving these things for 16 years," she said. "You'd think they'd have this perfected."

Some administrators suggest Duronda's case is an isolated one, but her counselor, William Miller, doesn't think so. "Citywide," he said, "she's got a lot of company."

Gerald Cavanaugh, former supervisor of evaluation, said the P&R forces teachers, from elementary to high school, to reemphasize basic skills. At high schools, computer printouts of test results help pinpoint each student's problems, he said. "When kids leave here, there are damn few who don't have basic skills."

Still, whether the test helps raise achievement levels in Denver schools remains uncertain. Hosler said there is insufficient data. The latest national standardized test results show a slight decline in tenth-grade scores since 1975. Last spring's sophomores scored roughly at national averages in reading, math, and language tests. But those scores may be inflated because only 70% of the class took that national test.

However, said Hosler, the P&R should not be tied to the achievement question. "That wasn't its purpose," he said. "The purpose was to guarantee to business and industry our diploma would have some validity."

So how do business and industry feel? "They (applicants) have problems even adding a column of figures," said Marcheta Henrich, a recruiter for Mountain Bell, the area's largest employer. She said the company does not even consider whether an applicant has a high school diploma, but gives its own basic skills test. Nearly half of the 1,248 applicants in the latest round of testing failed, she said. "Most business people have the same problem . . . . We are suffering because of the product that's coming to us."

Former testing supervisor Cavanaugh offered this advice on setting up a competency testing program at a recent conference in Nebraska:

– Make a trial run. Otherwise, officials might be shocked at the number who fail, he said.

– Start early. Denver schools, in fact, are devising tests for third- and sixth-graders.

– Set aside money for refresher courses. Neither Cavanaugh nor other officials, however, will estimate what Denver spends.

Denver schools may reap an extra benefit from the renewed interest in testing. Several publishing companies want to revise Denver's test, originally produced by California Testing Bureau and later bought by Denver schools. Hosler said the companies hope to sell it, with Denver getting royalties.

In addition, the P&R has attracted hundreds of educators to Denver, the district says. "It must have something going for it," said Assistant Superintendent LaRue Belcher, "or we wouldn't have people spend so much money to see us."

Omaha: Seven Tests of Competence

At most schools, graduation means you've spent a few years behind a desk piling up hours and credits. Here at Westside High School, it also means you've answered questions like:

Which can of Brand Z peaches is the best bargain?

A. 6 oz. at $.38
B. 8 oz. at $.42
C. 12 oz. at $.56
D. 24 oz. at $1.20
E. None of these

Or

Express 7/5 as a decimal.

Or

True or false? In a democracy you would expect to find: The Lutheran Church is declared by Congress to be an illegal organization.

If you think the questions are easy, most Westside students agree. At this 2,200-student school in an affluent Omaha suburb, about nine out of 10 pass most of the tests on their first try.

It is the one student in 10, the youngster who is not among the 80% here who are headed for college who is the focus of the competency tests, said Principal James Tangdall. "It's a remedial program, and the carrot out there is the diploma . . . . It certainly isn't going to help the kid going to the University of Nebraska or Yale or Harvard."

The seeds of the competency tests were planted in 1972, before competency testing became a national movement, when a group of Westside teachers and administrators rewrote the school's goals. The group restructured graduation requirements, adding tests in reading, math, writing, speech, consumerism, democratic process, and problem solving.

The tests, given since 1977, apparently have been quietly accepted here, where parents and schools are more likely to haggle about an elementary school textbook censorship controversy or about the free time in student schedules at high school.

Not that there aren't critics. Some say the tests are too easy and don't mean much. "Most minimum competency programs are a publicity stunt," said one teacher. But many observers, including school board president Robert Berkshire, like them. "We have a lot of feeling in our district that we're neglecting the basics," he said. "I tell you, there are a lot of people with whom it (testing) strikes a responsive chord."

Why has it won support? One explanation is that it started locally, said James Findley, Westside assistant principal. "A lot of legislatures, and school boards think they can legislate competency . . . . We had no pressure from outside. Our program grew from within."

Its chief benefit, Findley said, is the help it offers struggling students. Those who fail the reading test wind up in remedial classes. Failures in a preliminary math test in ninth-grade work with a tutor to get ready for the regular math exam in eleventh grade. For the other tests, students may seek help from classroom teachers, homeroom advisers, or aides. No tests are given later than the junior year.

"It's a gut feeling that the bottom 10% are leaving this building better pre-

pared than before," Findley said. Gut feelings aside, Westside has no specific scores on national achievement tests, for instance, to compare students before and after the installation of minimum competency programs. Findley did give Westside's tests to a sampling of 1976 seniors, hoping to compare results with those of 1977 seniors, but the project is not completed.

Findley, however, does say the tests have led, for example, to more emphasis on writing and a surge in enrollment in a consumer course. LaNeta Carlock, a business teacher, said enrollment doubled in the consumer course. "I am appalled the way kids cannot figure the interest they'll be charged or even do a bank statement," she said.

Even so, hardly anyone fails. In two years, out of about 1,600 graduates, only four failed to receive diplomas because of the tests. "I never got around to taking it," said Mike Mashl, one of those four. "I'm not too hot scholarly-wise," said Mike, who did return to finish the tests and later joined the Marines.

Like Mike, most who fail simply put off the tests, said Findley. As deadlines approach, 65 or 70 seniors still have one or more to complete, he said. "In February, March, and April, we'll have seniors down there busting their rear ends to get to that minimum level."

Some teachers say the school tries too hard to pass everybody. "It's awfully hard not to pass," said math teacher Roger Hoffman. "You've got teachers hounding you, secretaries hounding you, letters going home to parents .... Where do you draw the line between the kid taking responsibility for getting an education and the school badgering him?"

His criticism is not the only one. A frequent complaint is that the tests are too easy. The reading test, a commercially-produced exam, is rated about a seventh-grade level. The others were developed by Westside teachers and have no specific rating.

"My English teacher told me to write the easiest sentences I could think of," sophomore Kim Harms said of the writing test, which requires three related paragraphs of at least four sentences each, with no more than five errors.

"She gave me examples," said Kim, "like 'Dick and Jane ran up the hill,' and said I'd pass as long as the punctuation was right."

Social studies teacher Bill Nelson said students demonstrated more competence by working in the fall political campaign than by taking the democratic process test, a true-false quiz. "I would not think for a minute our test shows these kids will operate at a minimum level."

Findley himself worries about the speech test, an oral exam administered individually by 130 homeroom advisers. "It's a farce," said one adviser. "I haven't flunked anyone yet."

Still, many teachers support the tests, although most insist the tests are not Westside's prime goal and will not overshadow the rest of the curriculum. Even School Superintendent Vaughn Phelps agreed, "We don't think it's such a big deal."

For some students, it is. "It may take me another 30 or 40 times," said a junior who claimed he has failed the writing test seven times. One senior, who passed the writing test on his third try, said he hurried through the first two times. What tripped him up? "Spelling," he said, "punctuation, and I think capitalism (sic)."

St. Paul: An Alternative

While students in other cities hurdled paper and pencil tests on their way to graduation, David Samuelson collected letters, testimonies, and even telegrams. Some samples:

– A Boy Scout leader wrote that Dave planned menus and bought food for camping trips and earned cooking and camping merit badges.

– "In three years he has progressed from a beginning dancer to one of a high level of proficiency," wrote an official of The Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis.

– A drama teacher cited Dave's leadership and listed several plays in which Dave took part as an actor or director.

In all, Dave collected 30 pages of testimony from teachers, employers, and even his parents as part of a graduation requirement at the St. Paul Open School, where officials scoffed at the tests that are becoming popular as graduation requirements elsewhere. "We simply don't believe tests show much," said David Evertz, an information officer and teacher at the Open School.

Dave Samuelson and his classmates took only a handful of tests during their high school days and received no grades or credits for the courses they took. Instead, they found ways to demonstrate competency in six areas: career education, community involvement, current issues, consumer awareness, information finding, and personal and interpersonal skills.

Unlike seniors elsewhere, may of whom joke about the low level of minimum competency tests at their schools, seniors at the Open School appear to take their requirements seriously.

"I don't think you'll find anyone here who considers them a joke," said Evertz. Samuelson concurred: "I think it's harder, I think it's tougher, and that's good."

Under the Open School plan, each senior selects a graduation committee including a counselor, student advisor, a tenth-grade student, and another person of the senior's choice. The committee reviews the student's plans and eventually decides whether to recommend the student for graduation.

"It's a struggle for some of them," said Evertz. "Usually," he said, "two or three of about 40 seniors each year don't make it." That is a higher percentage of failure than in school systems like Omaha, Denver, or Gary where paper and pencil exams are used.

Some Open School supporters said paper and pencil tests just won't do what parents and taxpayers around the country hope they will – that is, guarantee students can function competently after graduation.

"They (parents) are not getting what they're being told they're getting," said Wayne Jennings, former Open School principal. "We call it consumer fraud . . . . I think it's a short-lived fad, a not very thoughtful approach to the complicated process of learning."

At the Open School, said Jennings, emphasis was placed on community involvement. "We didn't confine education to just books and classroom settings. I've always believed education should be defined as the development of competencies needed for life in a complex society."

The attempts to focus strictly on the Three Rs, he said, are a myopic way of looking at education. Today, people are calling on people to do a lot more than that. "We ought to work more on developing responsibility, initiative, perseverance, enthusiasm, ability to make decisions."

Another problem with most paper and pencil graduation exams is their low level, usually seventh- or eighth-grade material, said Joe Nathan, also a former administrator at the Open School. "People will say they're paying for 12 years of education and getting seven or eight . . . . I don't think it's going to increase the public's confidence."

Confidence in the Open School's requirements was not a problem for Ellen Scher, a member of the 1977 graduating class. "I'm personally very proud of my graduation packet," said the 19-year-old, who included as part of her packet an account of her experiences as an exchange student in Mexico. "I don't think students who go through a regular high school are ever held accountable for evaluating their own education," she said. "Here, you demand that a student look at education as an individual thing, not as a matter of I got six credits like everyone else did."

One parent, Dr. Robert Bjornson, was so impressed with his son's graduation packet that he made a copy of it. "When I graduated from high school," said Bjornson, "the trick was just to continue to breathe till the last day."

Oregon: A Competency Smorgasbord

Wait a minute. Wasn't this where it all got started? Wasn't this the place that rocked the education industry by telling high schoolers they had to prove their competence by passing skill tests, that just sitting at a desk wasn't good enough anymore? (See Phi Delta Kappa fastback 118. *The Case for Competency-Based Education* by Dale Parnell.)

Seven years ago, wasn't Oregon the spark that set the competency testing brushfire that now smolders in 36 states?

But just look around:

– In Albany, officials cut the number of competency skills from 165 to 92 after parents and teachers complained about them, including one that required physical education teachers to record the number of showers each student took.

– In Eugene, schools once required more than 200 competencies, but now list just 17. "It was just impossible," said one assistant principal, who still dislikes the idea, but says, "We'll play the damn game."

– In Lincoln County, schools list 243 minimum skills, including such things as the ability to list five jobs related to dance, "identify (your) parents' occupations," and "demonstrate a positive concept of self-worth."

What is all of this? "It's such a simple concept, and yet it caused a lot of trouble," said W.R. "Bus" Nance, graduation requirements specialist with the Oregon Department of Education in Salem. "In the beginning, no one knew what it was."

What it was, was a 1972 State Board of Education ruling on graduation standards, requiring students to demonstrate competence in reading, listening, speaking, writing, analyzing, and computing. By 1978, when the first class graduated under the new rules, the state's 300-plus school districts had nearly that many different programs, some simple, some mind-boggling.

"Some have as few as nine (competencies) and others up to 300," said State Senator Clifford Trow, who chaired task force hearings last year where administrators, teachers, and citizens testified, often contending the compe-

tencies were trivial, time-consuming, and a paperwork nightmare.

"I haven't been convinced it's much better than anything else," said Trow. "A lot of us believe the whole program was a public relations thing." His task force eventually recommended sweeping changes, saying it had serious reservations about using competencies as graduation requirements.

Whatever the problems, competency testing is here, and schools are coming up with results as different as those in Parkrose and Albany, for instance.

In Parkrose, a Portland suburb, "We viewed it as an opportunity to get our act together," said Clarence Mershon, graduation requirements director. According to Nance, the 4,200-student district "moved faster, further, better than any district in the state."

What makes Parkrose stand out? For one thing, it focuses its competency plan on junior high schools. Seventh- and eighth-graders get tested for many of the 84 competencies, including things like the ability to spell, write coherent paragraphs, perform simple mathematical operations, and understand an author's main idea.

"Why wait until high school to find out?" said Bob Frantz, principal at Heights Junior High. "We don't want to wait to see if a kid can read at the eighth-grade level by the time he's in ninth, tenth grade."

Among last year's ninth-graders, nine out of 10 passed the math competency and 95% the reading competency, a test requiring about an eighth-grade reading level. Less than half passed those tests as seventh-graders, according to Mershon. Those who don't pass are assigned to special classes at high school.

There is another advantage, said Mershon. "Some districts set the reading level at sixth grade and then test eleventh- and twelfth-graders, which is not good public relations. It's also a waste of time."

Perhaps Parkrose's most critical step, however, was the re-examination of its curriculum from kindergarten through twelfth grade. "It was high time," said Mershon. "It's important to assess what you're doing. We haven't been doing that in education." The curriculum review resulted not only in specific course goals, but extensive testing all the way down to the elementary level, said Mershon. "We had an era in the '60s and '70s where teachers were isolated in their classrooms doing whatever they damn well pleased without much direction." Said junior high English teacher Don Reed, "No one ever told me exactly what I was going to teach prior to this."

Teachers are among the plan's backers, and one reason is that they helped write not only course goals, but competency requirements as well. "They have spent so much time working on it that they have become committed to it," said Ron Sherwood, president of the Parkrose Faculty Association.

Tim Gillespie, director of an aiternative program for unmotivated students, said, "I think it's reasonable to assume a kid should be able to write four paragraphs when he gets out of school." Said another teacher, "Before, the assumption was you stay in school, keep your nose clean, and you'll graduate whether you have any skills or not."

When the district tried its math test on ninth-graders back in 1974 as an experiment, two out of three failed. "They were terrible in percentages, awful in story problems," said former math teacher Iris Collins. "It was a blow to everyone."

Not that there aren't critics. Jeanne Paul, a member of a Parkrose High School citizens group, said her eleventh-grade son "still writes very badly,

and yet he's been passed out of writing .... He neither punctuates nor spells correctly, and I'm protesting."

Such protests seem mild compared to the ones heard in Albany. Listen:

"It (competency testing) gives education a really bad name," said Bob Monson, an English teacher at West Albany High School. "Kids are universally aware the damn things are silly. They've come to the point where they're going through the motions like everyone else. I am, they are, and the administrators are."

Others, including some parents in the 4,000-student, grade 7-12 district, echo his criticism. Why? The answer may lie in the district's original list of 165 competencies, drawn up by teachers and approved by a citizens committee. Among other things its required students to:

– Read a clock, read a calendar, use the mail, and use a telephone.

– "Recognize nonverbal expressions." One teacher said, in mock annoyance, students might be asked "to look at the ceiling, roll their eyes, and sigh."

– "Maintain personal cleanliness," a goal students met by taking showers 80% of the time after physical education class. "The teacher had to check them off as they came out of the shower," said one principal. "Or," scoffed a teacher, "they had to be 80% wet."

Although those requirements were dropped, even the new list raised eyebrows:

– For Competency No. 45, students must identify eight of 10 parts on a diagram of the human body. "I don't know if it does any kid in the world any good to know where his pituitary gland is," said an aide who gives the test.

– A graduation manual says students must, "with at least 80% accuracy," match the terms "achievement, companionship, love, respect, and security" with five one-line definitions under Competency No. 39, "knowledge of psychological needs."

Albany school board member Mae Yih contends Albany took a simple idea and turned it into an expensive bureaucratic jumble. "It's an affront to the education system," she said. "It's a waste of taxpayers' dollars, a waste of teachers' time."

Rogene Odden, mother of three Albany teen-agers, said competencies miss the real problem. "There's a great need to upgrade standards for teachers. The competencies place the burden on children."

Despite such criticism, the district defends the revised competency plan, saying it has led to clearer classroom goals, better evaluation, and more help for slow students. The district did expand its remedial reading staff from three to five. It also hired an aide who keeps records and runs a lab where students catch up on missing competencies.

"I think (competencies) address the problem of the kid who doesn't aspire to higher education better than anything we've come up with so far," said Assistant Superintendent Robert Stalick. Before the competency plan started, said Stalick, "this district wasn't measuring kids systematically." He added, "In the past, we are confident we were graduating students who couldn't compute at basic levels, couldn't read."

Some backers believe the criticism will subside once the current crop of junior high school students reaches high school. Like Parkrose, Albany requires many of its competencies, particularly those related to basic skills, at the junior high school. "The older kids made a mockery of it, but our kids

see it as a task that has to be done," said North Albany Junior High School counselor Carolyn Sheppard.

One recommendation of Senator Trow's task force was to put the emphasis of competency testing at junior high schools and even elementary schools. Back in Parkrose, however, eighth-grader Chris Balzer raises a troubling question: "Why do you need to study your brains out for a competency you're just going to forget when you get older?"

Do students forget most of those skills by the time they graduate? Does competency testing make any difference?

Not Parkrose, not Albany, not even the State of Oregon has much evidence. Parkrose points to rises in seventh-grade mathematics standardized test scores and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. In Albany, this year's sophomores showed steady improvement during junior high on a standardized test. Whether those gains, particularly on a college entrance exam like the SAT, are tied to the minimum competency movement is questionable.

In fact, little data exists anywhere on how students performed prior to competency testing, said Gordon Ascher, associate superintendent with the state department of education. "We never said what problems the program is intended to cure," said Ascher, who hopes to get some answers early in 1979, when the first data is due back from a University of Oregon survey of districts.

Whether it cures graduates is in question, whether it denies them diplomas is not. Hardly anyone fails. Last spring, most Oregon schools found ways to get seniors over the competency hurdle. Albany, for instance, failed none of its 550 graduates on competency tests, Parkrose only one of its 370.

What is the future of competency testing in Oregon? Under current rules, Oregon requires the Class of 1981 to meet additional competencies in health, citizenship, science, environment, consumerism, highway safety, and career education.

However, State Superintendent Verne Duncan recently recommended dropping separate categories for consumerism, environment, and highway safety. In addition, Duncan suggests specific goals in reading, writing, and math at elementary schools – an apparent response to critics, like the Trow committee, that said the state competency plan focused too much on high schools.

Nance predicts the state will try to create more uniformity among districts by distributing a recommended or mandated list of competencies. One thing the state has not distributed is money, and just how much competency programs cost is uncertain.

Mershon estimates Parkrose's program costs about $10 a student for records and testing, roughly $42,000 a year. Albany officials would not estimate what their plan costs, but South High School Vice Principal Doug Killin called it "a tremendous expenditure, much more than we ever should have (spent)."

Despite the snarls, supporters and critics alike say the public reexamination of schools and the setting of clear classroom goals is healthy. "You can walk into a classroom and say to any teacher, 'What are you doing in this course?'" said Robert Gourley of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland. "That's got to make a difference." Said Nance: "It has done far more to revamp curriculum, improve curriculum, than anything that's been done in the last 50 years."

But Oregon's plan has left a trail of programs covering everything from pituitary glands to showers.

"I think (citizens) are concerned about whether kids can read, write, and compute," said Jack Felmet, chairman of an Oregon Education Association committee that recommended limiting the state program to those three basic skills. "This is sort of a nightmare of bookkeeping that really, in the final analysis, does not change anything."

John Porter, a senior at South Albany High School, said, "The competencies are a good idea, but more thought was needed . . . . When I was a sophomore I had to be able to dial a telephone. That's ridiculous."

Bakersfield: Some Troubling Data

In many cities where high schoolers must pass graduation skill tests, nobody is conducting research to find out whether the tests do any good. That leads skeptics to wonder whether those graduates really do any better in reading, writing, and math.

But here in this central California oil and farming community, where schools got a head start requiring graduation competency tests, officials did study test data. The result: Officials wonder whether graduates really do any better in reading, writing, and math. "There's a good possibility this whole minimum competency thing, if ever thoroughly assessed, would prove we really can't teach anything," said James Fillbrandt, principal of Bakersfield High School.

Researchers found seniors under competency requirements did no better on the tests, or even did slightly worse, than an earlier group not under the requirements. "We were very disappointed," said former reading consultant CeCelia Algra.

In light of the evidence, will schools here continue the program, one that costs an estimated $75,000 a year? The question is moot. A 1976 California law requires local districts to establish such programs by 1980. The Kern High School District, an 18,000-student district of 12 high schools plus alternative centers, started its competency plan back in 1971 with school board approval.

Besides its early start, two other things set the program apart: First, schools tested workers in local businesses to help determine passing scores; second, officials agreed to evaluate competency test results to see whether the program worked. The math test became a requirement for seniors of 1976, the reading test for 1977 seniors. A writing test will be required of 1981 graduates. All tests are first given to freshmen.

"We were picking up the vibes," said Algra, now a counselor at Bakersfield High. "People were complaining kids were getting out of high school and weren't able to read, do simple math."

The plan blossomed under Fillbrandt, a boyish-looking former research director, who, ironically, takes an iconoclastic view of the nation's competency testing movement. "From the learning side," he said, "it's nothing, it's garbage, it's no better than anything else." But Fillbrandt, who once opposed even the Kern proposal, admits he underestimated the idea's public appeal.

"This idea had tremendous potential politically. This is what the people wanted. It had the Three Rs with a screaming vengenance."

One apparently popular step was the decision to give the reading and math tests to local workers. "It was," said Fillbrandt, "the best thing I've ever done in my career." The district gave the tests to 300 clerks, secretaries, nurse's aids, firefighters, machine operators – workers in jobs requiring some math and reading skills, according to Algra. "We actually tested it with people these kids are going to have to compete with," she said.

One of those surveyed was Billie Ward, a 58-year-old grandmother and a buyer in the cosmetics department of a local drug store. "I remember there was some division or equations or something. I didn't think it was very difficult," she said. "I think it's great, I really do. I don't think kids are being taught properly. We have quite a few high school kids working here. Some of them can't even make change."

Her contention is hardly surprising in light of what the Kern district found. For example, on the 45-question math test, only 31% of this year's freshmen could find area and perimeter, 52% subtract decimals, and 57% measure a line. Because they are allowed to pass the 15 math objectives one at a time, most students meet the requirement eventually. In fact, out of 3,500 seniors last spring, fewer than 20 were denied diplomas because of failing the competency tests, the district estimates.

However, when schools retested samples of seniors in experiments during 1976 and 1977, only one in 10 passed all 15. The average senior passed 10.

Even more disturbing was that classes not under the requirements did just as well, not only in math, but reading. In fact, the average senior in 1975 passed 10.2 math objectives, compared with 10.2 in 1976, 9.9 in 1977, and 9.8 in 1978. On the reading exam, a test based on local newspaper stories, the average 1976 senior answered 24 of 30 test questions correctly, compared with 23.2 in 1977 and 23.8 in 1978.

"I can't get anybody in the district to take up the idea why those scores aren't improving," said Fillbrandt. "Nobody wants to touch it."

The belief that minimum competency programs help students learn is just one misunderstanding in a movement fraught with myths, contends Fillbrandt. "The whole thing has the potential for some very silly people to develop programs, and they will be a farce, a damn joke . . . . (Another) possibility, the most dangerous of all, is that people will treat this as saintly, as a panacea, and start wrenching their entire school program around it."

But, Fillbrandt urges, don't get him wrong. "We're not changing anything in terms of learning, but I'm glad we're doing what we're doing," he said. Others agree that new remedial math and reading courses, better identification of slow students, and clearer course goals are benefits of the Kern program.

"Students realize high school graduation is more than social passing," said Bakersfield High School teacher Thelma Chapman. "We are answering the need of business people who expect something of the diploma."

Said freshman Barbara Garcia: "If you want the title of high school graduate, you should also have the knowledge of one . . . . You just can't graduate and know nothing."

Mike Walters, 16, a junior, put it succinctly: "If you're dumb, it's a good idea."

Even Sherry Shamblin, a student in Bakersfield Adult School and 30-year-old mother of two, doesn't mind having to take the test. "If they can't add, subtract, multiply, and divide when they get out of high school, they shouldn't get out."

But there are critics, too, some of whom say the tests are too easy. "The things on the test were things I learned in fourth grade," said senior Kellie Myers. "What's the point?"

West High School math teacher Dorothy Wood, who designed the math competency test, said, "I can't see that it makes a difference. What makes a difference is when you have a teacher in the classroom, and you close the door and teach."

Wood hopes Kern schools will continue to examine test results, although officials say the research might be done less often. Wood contends educators in most places have been afraid to study the product of competency testing. "Everybody assumes it will do some good, but suppose it doesn't? That's too horrible to think about," she said. "We put too much of our ego into the thing."

Part II

Minimum Competency Testing: State Approaches

by Jimmie Covington
Education Writer
The Commercial Appeal
Memphis, Tennessee

Overview of the States

Barring any delays, Florida and New York in the spring of 1979 will graduate the first high school classes in the nation that have had to meet statewide minimum competency testing requirements.

Minimum competency testing – the most controversial and widespread education movement of the late 1970s – may well run head-on into reality in the two states.

Any delays, particularly in Florida, where the testing program has captured national attention, could have a chilling effect on other statewide testing programs being developed across the country.

A class action lawsuit has been filed in federal court in Tampa charging the Florida functional literacy test (now called the State Student Assessment Test, Part II) is racially discriminatory against blacks. The suit says that Florida has a history of racial discrimination and that 77% of the black students who took the test in October, 1977, failed the test's mathematics section while only 24% of the white students failed; and 26% of the black students failed the test's communications section in 1977 while only 3% of the white students failed. Overall results improved in the fall of 1978.

A task force established by the state cabinet – which sits as the state board of education in Florida – has voted 7-4 to recommend a one-year delay before high school students are denied diplomas on the basis of the assessment test. The group headed by Jesse McCrary, a black attorney from Miami who served as interim secretary of state in Florida, said the state "cannot morally justify" denying diplomas this year because many of this year's seniors were not taught what was tested.

The task force which included representatives of various groups around the state, including educators and civil rights leaders, said state education officials should overhaul the exam which they characterized as a "hastily constructed" and a "very shaky instrument." The task force also called for the testing to begin in the tenth grade instead of the eleventh grade and said eighth-graders should be given a rigid basic skills test to make sure they had minimum reading, writing, and mathematics skills before entering high school.

While still in the state legislature, Florida's new governor, Robert Graham, was among senators who unsuccessfully sought a delay in implementation of the graduation requirement until the state's remedial education programs could take effect.

Since the functional literacy requirement stemmed from 1976 legislative action, any delay in the test deadline would apparently have to be approved

by the legislature. Also, the scoring procedure for the test is under legal attack from the Florida Legal Services Association, which charges a proper economic impact study was not made.

The testing approach has strong support among many politicians, businessmen, parents, and newspapers in the state. A fear has been expressed that if it is delayed it will be killed entirely.

New York has escaped much of the national attention that Florida has attracted. Competency tests in New York are graded by local school systems and the only statewide reports come in surveys by the state education department. A report in the spring of 1978 indicated that 85% of the state's eleventh-graders had met the reading and mathematics testing requirement by that time, although only 63% of New York City's eleventh-graders had met the requirement.

Stung by criticism that the present tests are too easy, the state Board of Regents has mandated new tests for the class of 1982. The present reading and mathematics tests plus a writing test will be in effect for 1981 graduates. Students who pass comprehensive Regents examinations in English and mathematics do not have to take the competency tests.

The Regents examinations, which have been in use since 1865, are highly respected end-of-course examinations students may take if they pursue certain level courses. About 50 to 55% of New York high school students usually take the Regents examinations. Students who select certain courses and pass the examinations receive a Regents diploma. Other students who do not choose this approach receive local diplomas.

Although the minimum competency testing movement has rolled across the country in the 1970s, it has not captured all states and it may have reached a plateau as far as state legislative action is concerned.

A listing by Chris Pipho, associate director of the Department of Research and Information for the Education Commission of the States in Denver, indicates that about eight to 10 states have adopted statewide competency tests; another 10 to 12 states have adopted state competency requirements but not statewide tests; and 16 or so states have competency programs but they are not directly tied to graduation. The remaining 14 or so states have not joined the competency movement, and Pipho doubts that most of them will.

"The movement just defies being put in a chart or a newspaper headline," Pipho said, referring to the diverse approaches being taken by the states. "It generally appears the state legislatures are probably in a neutral position at this time. Moves have already been made in states that have political climates which would have permitted a move. I wouldn't expect a great deal more legislation at this point."

States that have programs are now moving into a stage of identifying standards, developing tests, and placing the programs into effect, he said. Court cases will be watched carefully.

Pipho cited a "big stick versus carrot approach" to funding. Some legislators feel that funding should be provided to aid in remediating student deficiencies while others feel that cutting back funding is the only way to force educators to make changes and improvement in education.

In states where competency assessment is left to local school systems and in cities that have their own competency testing programs, only small numbers of diplomas have been denied because of proficiency requirements alone.

A 1978 state survey in Arizona showed that only 202 out of 32,294 seniors failed to graduate because they did not meet proficiency standards. Another 2,407 did not graduate for other reasons, apparently from failure to meet course or other requirements.

In 1978 in Richmond, Virginia, city schools, 212 of 1,746 eligible seniors failed to meet course or proficiency requirements. Of the 212 a total of 156 met proficiency requirements but not course requirements, 45 did not meet course or proficiency requirements; and 11 met course requirements but not proficiency requirements. Twenty of the students met proficiency requirements during summer school.

Phoenix (Arizona) Union High School District officials said only four to eight of the 683 students who failed to graduate in 1978 were denied diplomas because they did not meet competency requirements.

There are a number of firsts in the diverse state competency picture.

Oregon was the first state to have state minimum competency graduation requirements. They were approved by the State Board of Education in September, 1972, and became effective with the class of 1978. There is no statewide test in Oregon, and some school districts certify the competency of students through regular courses without any special testing programs. There are no statewide figures available on the impact of the competency requirements on graduation.

New York was the first state to give a statewide competency test to students – to ninth-graders in the fall of 1975 on a pilot basis. The state Board of Regents in March, 1976, adopted a policy requiring high school graduates to pass competency tests in reading and mathematics. The requirement is in effect for the 1979 graduating class.

Arizona was the first state to have a graduating class subjected to state competency requirements – the class of 1976. The state Board of Education approved the requirement in November, 1973, and the policy became effective January 1, 1976. All testing and assessment is handled at the local level, and 1978 was the first year a state survey was conducted on the effects of the requirements.

Florida is the first state to provide major funding for remedial programs for students who do not pass competency tests. The state legislature appropriated $10 million for the 1977-78 school year and $26.5 million for the 1978-79 school year for remedial training for students in all grades.

The North Carolina legislature provided $4.45 million in remedial funds for the 1978-79 school year and Governor James B. Hunt, who campaigned strongly for a minimum competency testing program in that state, has pledged he will make an additional $4 million available depending on the results from the testing of high school juniors in the fall of 1978. The North Carolina State Board of Education has asked that $10 million be provided for the 1979-80 school year and $5 million for the following year.

So far, no other states have made major provisions for remedial funding although requests are expected to be made as competency programs come into effect.

In North Carolina, the competency graduation requirement goes into effect with the class of 1980. Among other states with statewide tests or plans for tests, Virginia has a test in effect for the class of 1981. Delaware and Alabama are developing tests aimed at 1981.

Tennessee, Nevada, and Maryland have laws or state board regulations mandating that 1982 graduates meet statewide competency requirements.

Laws and Regulations

Florida

Florida's 1976 Educational Accountability Act directs the state commissioner of education to "develop and administer in the public schools a uniform, statewide program of assessment to determine, periodically, educational status and progress and the degree of achievement of approved minimum performance standards. The uniform statewide program shall consist of testing in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 and may include testing of additional grades and skill areas as specified by the commissioner."

The law also specifies that each school district "shall periodically assess student performance and achievement in each school. Such assessment programs shall be based upon local goals and objectives which are compatible with the state's plan for education and which supplement the minimum performance standards approved by the State Board of Education."

Each school district is required to "establish a comprehensive program for pupil progression which shall be based upon an evaluation of each pupil's performance, including how well he masters the minimum performance standards approved by the state board."

Particular emphasis must be placed "upon the pupil's mastery of basic skills, especially reading, before he is promoted from grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. Other pertinent factors considered by the teacher before recommending that a pupil progress from one grade to another shall be prescribed by the school district board in its rules."

The literacy test graduation requirement stems from a section of the 1976 law which states:

"Beginning with the 1978-79 school year, each district school board shall establish standards for graduation from its secondary schools. Such standards shall include, but not be limited to, mastery of the basic skills and satisfactory performance in functional literacy as determined by the State Board of Education and the completion of the minimum number of credits required by the district school board.

"Each district shall develop procedures for the remediation of the deficiencies of those students who are unable to meet such standards. Based on those standards, each district shall provide for the awarding of certificates of attendance (changed to 'certificates of completion' in a 1978 amendment) and may provide for differentiated diplomas to correspond with the varying achievement levels or competencies of its secondary students."

(As pointed out by a study panel which examined the Florida program under sponsorship of the National Education Association and the Florida Teaching Profession–NEA, the word "test" is not used in the functional literacy requirement although testing is specified as the method of assessing basic skills. The law actually does not specify the method of assessing functional literacy performance.)

In carrying out the law, the Florida State Board of Education and State Department of Education have developed basic skills tests to be given each October to students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. Students who fail objectives on the tests are not required to retake the tests, but schools are supposed to provide remediation and then "certify" that the students have mastered the objectives.

Eleventh-graders are also given the State Student Assessment Test, Part II, (formerly the functional literacy test – the name was changed to get away from the implication that failure meant that a person was illiterate). The multiple choice answer test includes practical applications of skills in reading, writing, and mathematics and is divided into two parts – communications and mathematics.

A passing score of 70 is required on each section. The student must retake the section he or she does not pass. Three additional opportunities are given before graduation (1978-79 seniors are having only two additional opportunities), and if the student does not pass, he or she is scheduled to receive the certificate of completion. A student receiving a certificate may enter the adult education program and continue to take the test until a passing mark is received.

North Carolina

North Carolina has two state testing laws, both enacted in 1977 at the urging of Governor Hunt. The laws establish a minimum competency testing program and an annual testing program. The competency testing law requires the adoption of "tests or other measurement devices . . . to assure that all high school graduates possess those minimum skills and that knowledge thought necessary to function as a member of society, to provide a means of identifying strengths and weaknesses in the education process, and to establish additional means for making the educational system accountable to the public for results."

The law specifies that tests must be given to all eleventh-graders beginning in the fall of 1978.

"Students who fail to attain the required minimum standard for graduation in the eleventh grade shall be given remedial instruction and additional opportunities to take the test up to and including the last month of the twelfth grade.

"Students who fail to pass parts of the test shall be retested on only those parts they fail."

Students in special education programs may be excluded from the testing.

The North Carolina law established a 15-member Competency Test Commission consisting of teachers, principals, other educators, and interested citizens, all appointed by the governor. The duties of the commission include conducting research and selecting tests for recommendation to the State Board of Education and advising the state board annually on matters relating to the use of high school graduation competency tests.

After conducting research, the commission, headed by James Gallagher of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, recommended the adoption of modified versions of the Senior High Assessment of Reading Performance (SHARP) and the Test of Proficiency in Computational Skills (TOPICS) tests.

In making the selection, three prospective reading and three prospective mathematics tests were given to North Carolina high school juniors in the spring of 1978 along with standardized achievement tests in reading and math.

All juniors participated in the pilot testing. Using the achievement tests to gain information on the difficulty of the competency tests, the commission found that the math test appeared to be more difficult than the reading test. Passing scores of 72% on the reading test and 64% on the math test were recommended by the commission and adopted. A special panel reviewed the tests in an effort to remove all cultural bias. The tests include both basic skills and practical applications of skills.

The second North Carolina testing law, setting up the annual testing program, requires that criterion-referenced tests be given to students in grades 1 and 2 and norm-referenced standardized tests be given to students in grades 3, 6, and 9. The tests were first administered in April, 1978. School system results were released statewide.

"It is the intent of this testing program to help local school systems and teachers identify and correct student needs in basic skills rather than to provide a tool for comparison of individual students or to evaluate teacher performance," the law says.

This law includes the appointment of an 11-member testing commission, including six certified teachers employed in grades in which the tests are to be administered. The appointments are made by the governor.

Commission duties include evaluating and selecting tests and making recommendations to the State Board of Education as well as annually reviewing the "suitability and validity of the tests."

The North Carolina State Board of Education has adopted an advisory group's recommendations on graduation requirements and high school diplomas, certificates, and transcripts. Under the policies, diplomas are granted to students who complete all state and local course requirements and make a passing score on the state competency test. Students completing all state and local course requirements, but not passing the competency test, will receive a "certificate." It is not a certificate of completion or attendance but simply a "certificate."

A transcript must be issued to all students receiving a diploma or certificate. The transcript includes a record of all courses completed and grades earned, senior high school attendance, participation in special programs, or any other information as determined by the local board.

Also adopted was a policy that all students who fail to pass the competency test by the last month of their senior year may receive additional remedial instruction and continue to take the competency test during regular test periods until they reach the maximum school age of 21.

In a memorandum to school superintendents and secondary school principals, Craig Phillips, North Carolina's superintendent of public instruction, says the certificate "should be easily distinguishable from the diploma and in no way may indicate graduation or use of the term 'diploma.' The standards for the certificate are the same as those for the diploma except that the diploma requires passing the Competency Test."

Virginia

In Virginia, a major move toward a state competency testing program came in July, 1976, when the State Board of Education revised high school accreditation standards and included a requirement that students had to demonstrate minimum skills in reading, mathematics, citizenship, and the ability to continue their education or get a job. Assessment of the skills was left to school systems.

However, some local school superintendents across the state decided a statewide test would be better and the Virginia Association of School Administrators called for a state testing program, said Harry Smith, special assistant for public information and publications with the Virginia Department of Education.

In the spring of 1978, the Virginia General Assembly changed the *Standards of Quality and Objectives*, which govern the operation of Virginia public schools, and established the state testing requirement for graduation.

Smith said some superintendents in Virginia have now expressed sentiment for a return to local testing "which would get back to where we were in the beginning."

The *Standards of Quality and Objectives*, as changed by the General Assembly, specify:

"It is the policy of the Commonwealth that the awarding of a high school diploma shall be based upon achievement. In order to receive a high school diploma from an accredited secondary school after January 1, 1981, students shall earn the number of units of credit prescribed by the Board of Education and attain minimum competencies prescribed by the Board of Education. Attainment of such competencies shall be demonstrated by means of a test prescribed by the Board of Education."

The Virginia rules also state that norm-referenced tests be administered annually to selected groups of students "for the purpose of assessing the educational progress" of the students.

Virginia for years has had an annual standardized testing program usually in grades 4, 6, 8, and 11. Because of lack of funding, the standardized tests were given only in grades 4 and 8 in 1977-78. Plans for 1978-79 call for testing in grades 4, 8, and 11.

At the elementary level, Virginia legislators mandated in 1976 that statewide learning objectives be developed in basic skills for kindergarten through grade 6.

The 1978 assembly specified that annual criterion-referenced testing be undertaken on the basic skill objectives in elementary grades under this schedule:

1978-79 – reading and mathematics, grades 1-3
1979-80 – reading and mathematics, grade 4
1980-81 – reading and mathematics, grades 5-6, and communications skills, grades 1-6.

The assembly also specified that remedial training be given to low-achieving students in elementary grades.

The tests are being developed by the State Department of Education and are to be administered in connection with the individual instruction of students rather than having statewide testing dates.

Richard Boyer, assistant state superintendent for program development, said the basic skill objectives and tests in elementary grades are not tied to

promotion and retention but are aimed at improving the skills of students in the early grades.

Because of the short time between the adoption of the high school graduation testing requirement in the spring of 1978 and a desire to have tests ready for tenth-graders in the fall of 1978, Virginia education officials undertook perhaps the most rushed program in the country to develop standards, select tests, and determine passing scores. This year's tenth-graders will be the first class to come under the 1981 graduation requirement.

The education department and state board pinpointed 15 competencies in mathematics and two in reading. Two commercial tests were selected after a quick study – the Instructional Objectives Exchange (IOX) Basic Skill Test in reading and the Virginia Beach Test for Mathematics, developed for the Virginia Beach school division by Scholastic Testing Service.

Since state education officials did not have time to pilot or field test the tests with a sample of Virginia students, they wanted to wait until after the results were in from the first testing to set a passing score. However, the state board decided that the scores should be set before the tests were given. Board Chairman Henry Tulloch said the board wanted to avoid charges that the standard was fixed for political reasons in an effort to avoid too many failures.

Testing dates were delayed for a month in the fall of 1978 and state department of education officials were asked to come back with a recommendation on scores. The department assembled a group of school and community persons, conducted a quick study, and recommended that passing scores be set at 70.

There was controversy over whether students who pass the test in the ninth grade should be required to retake it in their senior years. The state board decided that, at least for the classes of 1981 and 1982, students will not have to retake the test in their senior years if they pass it in their earlier years. James W. Tyler, deputy superintendent for Richmond public schools, called for senior year testing as a method of providing incentive for students.

Under the Virginia plan, the graduation tests will be given initially in grade 9. The tests were given to tenth-graders in the fall of 1978 since they will be the first students coming under the graduation requirement. Testing for ninth-graders was scheduled for April of 1979.

Early projections from the 1978 fall testing of tenth-graders were that only 15% of the students failed the reading test and 18% the mathematics test. Failure rates of 20 to 25% had been predicted. The projections were based on scores received from about one-fourth of Virginia's 141 school divisions.

W. E. Campbell, state superintendent of public instruction, was quoted as concluding that the tests are neither too easy nor too hard; that the test movement is making the impact sought by the General Assembly and state board in that most students seem to be learning basic skills and that some areas with high failure rates need extra help.

No state remedial funding has been provided in Virginia but education officials said there have been indications that some might be provided in the future.

Nine local school divisions, which had already set up their local testing programs, have been exempted from the state test through 1982. In Virginia, local school systems are still required to assess students' competencies in citizenship skills and the ability to continue their education or find jobs.

New York

New York education officials over a three-year period have changed graduation competency requirements three times. The Board of Regents mandated in March, 1976, that 1979 graduates pass basic competency tests in reading and mathematics. The policy was changed in 1976-77 and competency tests in writing skills, practical sciences, health, and civics and citizenship were added as requirements for 1980 graduates.

However, since then, the requirements in sciences, health, and civics and citizenship have been dropped and the 1980 graduates must pass reading, mathematics, and writing tests. The reading and math tests stress practical applications of skills. Officials said the other tests were dropped so that more emphasis could be placed on the basic reading, mathematics, and writing skills.

As a result of criticism that the tests were too easy, the Regents have voted for the development of three new tests in reading, writing, and mathematics as requirements for the 1981 graduates.

Many students who will be graduating in 1981 already have taken and passed the old tests. Some local school officials are expecting confusion and criticism when students and their parents become fully aware that the students are required to take an entirely new set of tests. The final standards on the new tests are to be considered for adoption in February, 1979.

When the basic competency tests were initially adopted in 1976, it was decided that all students would be required to take the tests. However, this has since been changed to exempt students who pass Regents examinations in comprehensive English and mathematics. The new competency tests stress basic academic skills rather than practical applications of skills.

In setting tentative standards for the new tests, the Regents stated:

"The long-range goal of the Board of Regents is that each student in New York State, to qualify for a high school diploma, attain a standard of achievement in reading comprehension equal to the average difficulty of materials in use in twelfth-grade courses. The Board expects this goal to be achieved over a five-year period.

"The Regents establish a tentative standard for reading comprehension required for a high school diploma equal to the average difficulty of materials in use in the tenth- and eleventh-grade courses."

Some newspaper writers and others have interpreted this to mean that the reading comprehension test is to be on the tenth- or eleventh-grade levels initially with movement to the twelfth-grade level over five years. However, the average difficulty of materials in any grade might vary considerably. Grade level is usually considered to be the median, or middle score, of a sample of students used in establishing norms for standardized achievement tests.

The new reading comprehension test is based on a new approach called "degrees of reading power." Reading and education specialists said the new reading requirement will substantially raise the level of reading comprehension required of high school graduates.

The writing test will require that a student write a business letter, a report, and a persuasive message. The mathematics test will consist of 60 questions. Some will require the student to produce his or her own answers. Others will be multiple choice. Passing scores on the New York tests have been set at 65%, the traditional passing score on New York tests.

In elementary grades, New York State, since 1966, has had statewide reading and mathematics achievement tests for all pupils in grades 3 and 6 in a program called the Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP).

Preliminary competency tests in reading and writing are planned for grades 8 and 9 to assist in the identification of students needing help in the competency areas. The tests will be given to students who score below certain levels on the PEP sixth-grade reading tests or nationally standardized reading tests.

The new graduation tests in reading comprehension and writing are to be administered in grades 11 and 12 and the mathematics test is to be given after the student has completed a new required mathematics course. (Before the change, the competency graduation tests usually were given to ninth-graders and sometimes to eighth-graders.)

No state remedial funding has been provided in connection with the new competency requirements. No legislative action on competencies has been taken in New York. The competency requirements stem solely from Board of Regents action.

Before adopting the final standards on the new tests, Regents set up a widespread review of the proposals by statewide public and non-public educational groups, the education commissioner's and Regents' advisory councils, and representatives of the University of the State of New York. The Regents also sought advice from other organizations and the general public.

Arizona

Arizona's State Board of Education policy on competencies and graduation states:

"The State Board of Education has adopted the goal that every student shall have the equal opportunity to learn to read and write effectively and to master basic computational skills.

"The State Board believes that developing standards for these basic skills is prerequisite and essential to the learning process of the student. Therefore the State Board requires that promotion from year to year shall be based upon predetermined standards for these basic skills as established by the local district.

"The State Board further requires that each student shall attain at least a sixth-grade competency in reading, computational, and written communicative skills, as determined by the local district, prior to receiving the standard eighth-grade certificate of promotion. This policy becomes effective January 1, 1976.

"The State Board further requires that each student shall demonstrate ability to read at a ninth-grade level of proficiency as shall be established by the local district, prior to graduation from high school. The policy becomes effective for classes after January 1, 1976."

Arizona has a strong tradition of local control of education. Although a relatively low population state, it has about 230 public school districts. The City of Phoenix has all or part of 18 separate public school districts within its boundaries – each with its own superintendent and school board. The districts are divided among elementary districts, unified districts, and high school districts.

As part of an accountability movement, the state legislature in 1975 mandated that each school district develop a Continuous Uniform Evaluation System (CUES). The law calls for districts to develop a plan of student achievement in the basic areas of reading, writing, and computational skills.

The approach requires that all districts develop learning objectives, pupil evaluation systems, alternative learning plans, a record-keeping system that follows students along, and a parent reporting system to keep parents informed.

Veronica Zepeda, state education specialist for CUES, said, "Basically it is a way of keeping track of individual student learning."

The two biggest criticisms, she said, are from school officials for a lack of money and from legislators and the public for lack of uniformity. The programs have not yet been placed in full effect in all districts.

Arizona state law requires standardized reading achievement testing of all third-grade students and standardized mathematics testing of all fifth-grade students. The third-grade testing went into effect in 1970-71 and the fifth-grade testing in 1975-76.

A bill was introduced in the Arizona legislature in 1978 calling for criterion-referenced testing in grades 3, 7, 8, 11, and 12 to ascertain proficiency in basic skills and norm-referenced achievement testing in reading, grammar, and mathematics in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 using nationally standardized tests. The bill, which failed to gain approval, said the achievement test data would be used in periodic evaluation and revision of the criterion-referenced testing program.

The proposal also provided that students in addition to their regular graduation diplomas would receive special achievement endorsement certificates if they performed at expected levels on the criterion-referenced tests at the end of grades 8 and 12.

An $850,000 appropriation was included in the bill to carry out the program. Some officials said the bill may be presented again in the legislature.

The Phoenix Union High School District, a 27,000-student high school district in Phoenix, introduced a reading competency test in 1975 and a mathematics competency test in 1976, said Tom McDonald, general education supervisor in the district. An English writing test will go into effect with the class of 1981. Students begin taking the tests – which were developed within the school system – at the beginning of the ninth grade and, as they progress through high school, continue to be tested on the skills in which they are weak.

In the past four years, from 10.3% to 12.5% of freshmen have passed in the initial testing.

Among seniors in 1977-78, 97.2% had passed all skill areas in math by June of their senior year and 97.8% had passed all reading skill areas.

"I'm not opposed to it (the testing) because we are comfortable with what we are doing," McDonald said. "As long as it is locally developed and criterion-referenced with a sample of norm-referenced testing to validate it, I am not opposed to it. I think one of the national trends in competency testing is that states are moving a little more slowly and listening to educators. The states that are moving more slowly are doing a better job."

David Byrne, assistant superintendent for educational services with the Washington Elementary Schools District in Phoenix, said the district is probably the first large school district in Arizona to implement CUES completely.

"Achievement cards are kept on each child beginning with kindergarten," he said. "We have mastery tests after teaching occurs. If students attain 80%, it indicates they have mastered a concept. We do not tie it to promotion or retention. It is really a flowing system. Some students may be working ahead.

We feel you still have to take into account that children do not achieve at the same rate. Show me one other area of human endeavor where everyone has to exit at the same level."

Byrne said the district met "a lot of teacher resistance initially" in placing the program into effect because of the major increase in record keeping on individual students.

Parents receive a summary report at the end of each school year showing the concepts introduced and mastered during the year by their child.

Nevada

The Nevada state legislature in 1977 enacted a law requiring proficiency examinations in reading, writing, and mathematics before the completion of grades 3, 6, 9, and 12.

A section of the law states:

"If a pupil fails to pass the proficiency examination administered before the completion of grade 3, 6, or 9, he may be promoted to the next higher grade, but the results of his examination shall be evaluated to determine what remedial study is appropriate. If a pupil fails to pass the high school proficiency examination administered before the completion of grade 12, he shall not be graduated until he is able, through remedial study, to pass that examination, but he may be given a certificate of attendance, in place of a diploma, if he has reached the age of 17 years old . . . . The state board of education shall prescribe standard proficiency examinations to be administered."

The graduation requirement goes into effect with the class of 1982.

The state board and state department already had task forces of teachers and school administrators developing a competency based graduation program at the time of the law's enactment. State education officials appointed an ad hoc committee which recommended that the Stanford Achievement Test be used for the April, 1978, proficiency examinations in grades 3 and 6. Other examinations may be selected or developed in the future.

In the spring and summer of 1978, test item writing groups of teachers and other educators were convened to develop a ninth-grade test to measure skills in arithmetic and reading, said R. H. Mathers, consultant in technical services with the Nevada Department of Education. An American College Testing (ACT) Program consultant aided in the project.

A pilot test was administered to a sample of more than 1,000 in grade 9 in November, 1978. After validity and reliability studies, the test will be administered to all ninth-graders in the spring of 1979. Test development costs were paid from federal Title IV-C funds.

Also in 1978, the department contracted with Educational Testing Service to train about 60 teachers across the state in the scoring of writing samples.

"My personal view is that if the ninth-graders pass it (reading and math) they should be exempt from the twelfth-grade test," Mathers said. "There is a lot of opposition to that. Some want it in the twelfth grade. My answer is that if you live long enough you forget everything anyway."

He said there probably should be a more advanced writing test for twelfth-graders than the ninth-grade test.

No state remediation funds have been provided. The state department plans to ask for $110,000 for test development.

Tennessee

The Tennessee State Board of Education voted on November 10, 1977, to impose a proficiency test requirement for high school graduation effective with the class of 1982. Juniors are to be tested in the spring of 1981 and those who do not pass the test will have two additional opportunities during their senior year.

The state board also required that local school systems give diagnostic tests in grades 4, 5, or 6 and in grade 8. In the spring of 1978, the state provided an eighth-grade basic skills test purchased from a commercial firm and based on 50 objectives from the Denver proficiency and review test.

The Denver test had been given to a sample of high school seniors in the spring of 1977 as a preliminary step in moving toward a competency testing program.

So far, state education officials have had to pull money from existing budgets to pay for purchase and scoring of the eighth-grade test. Officials say the reasons for selecting the Denver test include the fact that the test has been in effect since the early 1960s and after several years the failure rate has become quite low, about 1.5%.

The state board action in November, 1977, and a decision to give an eighth-grade test in the spring put the state education department in a time and money bind. "We felt a little frantic about the whole situation," said Jessie Warren, assistant commissioner of education for instructional services. Only enough funds were available to purchase one test for each four students. The short supply of tests caused scheduling problems for many school systems.

A cut-off score of 70% was selected arbitrarily for the four sections of the test. In the statewide results, 65% of the eighth-graders scored 70 or above in language, 47% in mathematics, 46% in spelling, and 42% in reading.

Realizing that the testing should be based on learning objectives developed within Tennessee, state education officials in 1978 met with groups of teachers in the state and came up with 139 objectives. Through a further survey of superintendents and 1,400 teachers, the number of objectives was compressed to 80.

The state board decided that eighth-graders will be tested on 50 of the 80 objectives in the spring of 1979 but teachers will not be told which 50. In January, 1979, education officials selected a new eighth-grade diagnostic test from a different testing firm. Although little attention has been given so far to the graduation test, it appears it will be just another version of the eighth-grade test.

"Who knows what will happen between now and 1982," Mrs. Warren said. "We will have an adequate time to find out what is happening in the courts and in other states. We need to approach it from the standpoint that whether or not there is a mandated test for a diploma in 1982, if children are not mastering basic skills we need to look at instructional programs and see what changes should be made. Whether or not we have a mandated requirement for graduation, the efforts have not been in vain. So everyone should not be so defensive."

Once the graduation test is in effect, the state board plans for local school districts to provide their own eighth-grade tests as well as tests in lower elementary grades.

State education officials also have declined to release a state listing of how school systems score on the eighth-grade test. No state remedial funding is being provided in Tennessee.

Kentucky

The Kentucky legislature in 1978 enacted a statewide testing program but the law has no graduation or promotion requirement based on test scores.

All students in grades 3, 5, 7, and 10 will be given achievement tests in April and each local school system must develop a plan to aid students the following year in grades 4, 6, 8, and 11.

The state will give criterion-referenced diagnostic tests at the beginning of grades 4, 6, 8, and 11 to students who have been identified through the achievement tests as having weaknesses in basic skills.

The local school systems are required to hold public hearings and involve citizens in developing their plans to aid students, said Donald Van Fleet, head of the office of research and planning for the Kentucky State Department of Education. He thinks the Kentucky testing law gives educators more flexibility than laws in other states. "The only problem is there is really insufficient money to do a great deal of remediation," he said.

The state is providing $400,000 for testing purposes this year and $1.75 million for next year.

The state student assessment section in Florida has a budget this year of $1.3 million. In North Carolina, the minimum competency testing program is costing $164,168 this year and the annual testing program which includes tests in other grades is costing $902,858.

The two-year budget for state testing is about $2.6 million in Virginia.

The program under the New York State bureau of elementary and secondary educational testing is costing about $800,000 this year and there are some testing costs under other offices. Scoring of tests in New York is done by local school systems. Nevada provides $96,000 a year for testing in grades 3 and 5.

The Critics

U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer says some approaches to minimum competency testing amount to placing "an evaluation time bomb at the end" of high school.

Arthur Wise, senior social scientist with the Rand Corporation and a former National Institute of Education (NIE) official, says, "It looks like a cheap fix on a serious problem."

Marianne Amarel of Educational Testing Service predicts, "We will see few if any thoughtful and judiciously implemented minimum competency tests. The omens and portents point to constriction of the curriculum."

Jack Bardon of the University of North Carolina faculty says, "There is an absence of firm data about actual consequences . . . . The problem of minimums becoming maximums is a serious one."

Minimum competency testing draws biting criticism from a number of educators, researchers, and sociologists.

Joan C. Baratz, director of Educational Testing Service's Education Policy Research Institute in Washington, said, "Minimum competency testing will not last as a distinct phenomenon any more than performance contracting or 'new math' have persisted as central foci of educational change.

"New fads, or at least new terms to describe allegedly basic changes in practice and procedure, tend to fly through the educational profession, but they tend also to be short lived."

However, Ms. Baratz is perhaps more moderate in her views than some critics of minimum competency testing. "There is no cause to believe that the minimum standard craze hurts children any more than what we have been doing in the past," she said. "Just as it is politically necessary to pass legislation setting standards, so it is politically infeasible to have a majority of students fail them"

And Boyer said he favors "testing for the right reason at the right time," although he is opposed to programs which merely place competency tests at the end of the high school years. "The reason (for testing) is to find out weaknesses of students and the time is in the early grades where they can be aided," he said. "I believe it should occur in the first few grades with every effort to be made to aid those not achieving. Evaluation should be used to keep people in school rather than kick them out."

William Spady, an NIE senior research sociologist, said, "We impose testing conditions on people as though tests are going to solve problems. We have not been willing to go off into entertaining a new method of thinking about

solutions and strategies . . . . The whole question people are not asking is why are we doing all of this testing and what is it we are going to gain." Schools should be organized not around time as now but around "clear outcomes and goals," he said.

Wise said, "My view is that there is no decline in achievement. The most relevant statistics, from the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) on all 17-year-olds, show that reading and other (skills) have remained stable since the tests began in 1969. The college board scores have declined but they are less relevant to the issue. They cover more advanced skills and are taken only by the top one-third of students.

"In part this has been a media event. The decline of college board scores was treated sensationally by the press. This interacted with politicians' natural desire to save taxpayers' money which interacted with Proposition 13 and the conservative movement . . . . I think state legislators took it upon themselves (to impose competency testing). I don't think the public took it upon themselves to do it."

The minimum competency testing push may backfire on state legislators, he said.

"The state legislature is going to be blamed for the problem. Now they are blaming local school systems but they have made it a state problem and they get the blame. They (legislators) will not be too happy with this . . . .

"People who advocate competency testing obviously believe it is going to make schools better. I personally believe all it will succeed in doing is dividing high school students into two groups. I will grant education has become somewhat soft in recent years. I think as a nation we are well on the way to solving that softness. I think this can occur without competency testing . . . . It (competency testing) distracts. It lets us sit back and say for the next few years this is going to be our big push for improving education for the kids. Without trying something else, it will fail . . . . The cutting edge question is what will be done differently because of this."

Wise said it would be politically impossible to flunk half the students on a competency test. "I think you will, considering you can flunk only 5 to 10%, need a test that is damn easy."

The National Academy of Education committee on testing and basic skills in a report to the assistant secretary of education said:

"The NAE Panel believes that setting of statewide minimum competency standards for awarding the high school diploma – however understandable the public clamor which has produced the current movement and expectation – is basically unworkable, exceeds the present measurement arts of the teaching profession, and will create more social problems than it can conceivably solve.

"It is basically unworkable because in many populous states cut-off points for a passing grade that are politically and educatively acceptable to parents, pupils, and educators would have to be so low that an overwhelming majority of students would be allowed to pass. This would make the diploma standard almost meaningless . . . .

"The effort to determine and assure minimum competency standards for high school graduation will also fall of its own weight, for the scaffolding of existing test designs is too weak to carry such an emotionally laden and ambiguous burden. Continuing any extensive efforts and funds in this direction is wasteful and takes attention away from the major tasks of improving our schools."

However, the panel did agree that "a series of standardized tests at the lower grade levels used for diagnosing individual student weaknesses, pinpointing remediation needs, and building public pressures if schoolwide performances in basic skills continue over time to be consistently low, could be positive influences on student learning."

The federal court suit filed against the Florida functional literacy testing program by Bay Area Legal Services, Inc., in Tampa, says Florida has a long history of legally enforced segregation and that the state actively resisted school desegregation. Blacks who are presently seniors spent part of their school years in segregated schools where they received inferior educations, the suit charges. It also says the test was imposed after students had completed more than 10 years of their schooling and that the students were not provided with instruction and curriculum in all areas covered by the test.

Charges also include that the test is racially biased, that it has not been properly validated or checked for reliability, and that there is "no legitimate educational justification" for using the test to deny regular high school diplomas.

Remedial classes have the effect of perpetuating discrimination since they are disproportionately black as a result of the numbers of blacks failing the test, the suit says.

In North Carolina, a field coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference filed a federal suit seeking a temporary restraining order to block the administration of competency tests in the fall of 1978. However, the suit was filed on the first day of testing, too late for any action to be taken before the tests were administered.

NAACP officials and an NAACP education task force are keeping a close eye on the minimum competency testing program in North Carolina.

"We are going to go along with the test," said Mrs. Willie Mae Winfield, head of the NAACP task force. "We believe in testing but we are going to study the results of the test after it is taken and see if it is going to be properly implemented as we have been promised.

"I talked with the governor and state board of education also and they said there would be remediation to help each child in what he is weak in. We are going to work with it as long as it is done properly."

In Florida, a number of black leaders, including NAACP leaders, have criticized the testing program.

Charles Cherry, state NAACP president in Florida, said, "My basic argument is that the test, written by white people based on their own middle-class white experience, does not reflect the experience of black people."

Robert Travis, president of the Tallahassee NAACP branch, said, "The local branch is not opposed to competency tests in general. Basically what we are opposed to specifically with the Florida test is that it is racially and culturally biased. The areas in which they are testing have not been taught in the high schools. We think it really is just a ruse to keep black kids out of college."

Ron Bailey, head of the political science department at Florida A&M University, said, "The way they are doing it, it becomes a new form of slavery, peonage, or separate but equal . . . . They put you in educable mentally retarded classes and optional classes and when you get to the twelfth grade you flunk the exam . . . . If you can't get to college, you certainly can't get to law school and medical school."

The National Education Association and the Florida Teaching Profession (NEA) contracted with an evaluation panel, headed by Ralph Tyler, senior consultant with Science Research Associates, to conduct a study of the Florida testing program.

Among its findings, the panel reported, "It appears as if the current class of eleventh-graders who are black and poor were sacrificed for the purpose of rapid implementation of the functional literacy segment of the accountability act.

"It is evident that there is little active concern for the appropriateness of the testing program for a large segment of the school population (the black and poor)."

The panel said it found the purpose of the Florida Accountability Act to be praiseworthy.

"However, the strategy adopted in the statewide minimum competency testing program, with its mandatory standards for receiving a regular high school diploma, is seriously faulty . . . .

"A strategy likely to be more effective in improving education in Florida would have helped schools to identify their particular problems and assisted each school in developing educational programs designed to attack serious problems for that school . . . .

"The panel also finds the implementation faulty. It appears that the inadequacies are largely due to excessive haste in instituting the program and failure to make maximum effort to communicate with and involve responsibly all those who are responsible in making the program work and those who are seriously affected by it."

Tom Innes, director of educational assessment with the Tennessee State Testing and Evaluation Center in Knoxville, said, "If you ask me to separate the competent from the incompetent, I would say I don't want to play God. I don't think measurement can do that. No test can be devised that will separate them. And the people who say that they can are speaking more of hope than they are of experience. I think competency-based education may be OK and competency testing for instructional improvement may be OK. It's been made too much of, I think."

Paul Smith, senior researcher with the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, said states do not have the money to devise tests which are up to Educational Testing Service standards and ETS does not have a market large enough to invest in development of such tests. There would have to be a different test for each state.

"There is that subtle difference between an admissions test (the SAT, ACT) and an emissions test (a graduation competency test)," said Smith. "The purpose of an admissions test is a single standard. The purpose of an emissons test is for each community to determine what constitutes minimum competency."

The Supporters

Minimum competency testing has led to "kids buckling down and getting serious about their school work," North Carolina and Florida education officials said.

"We've had a genuinely positive reaction throughout the state," said William Brown, director of research for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

"The kids had picked up the notion they did not have to achieve much to go from grade to grade. Several years of lowered expectations have resulted in kids doing less. With this year's raised expectations, the kids are doing more.

"The remedial program for some youngsters will be quick and rather simple. For others, it will take the full two years (before graduation) to get them up to standard. I really don't expect many children not to pass."

Thomas Fisher, director of student assessment with the Florida Department of Education, said, "Students clearly learn what they are supposed to learn and they do it. The indication we have is that the challenge is well received by the students.

"I think it has created something of an instant revolution, particularly in secondary education to the benefit of the students. I think we are giving them a golden opportunity. It seems we are putting every creative effort into helping students who have been passed along before . . . .

"We are not testing to fail students. We are testing to determine if our students have mastered functional math and communications skills. For those students in need of additional work to attain these skills, we will provide additional assistance so they can eventually be able to pass the test."

Fisher said charges that the test is racially discriminatory are not valid.

"It discriminates between people who can read and those who can't. It discriminates between those who can count and those who can't," he said.

He said the state went to great efforts to develop the learning objectives and the tests, including wide involvement of local school districts, field testing, and revisions.

"The heat and the controversy (about the testing program) have come from outside the State of Florida," he said. "I can't think of a single newspaper in Florida that has come out and said it is a bad idea . . . .

"The issue is going to be very hotly discussed and debated this year. I think this is good. Out of it is going to come a commitment from the state one way or the other, a commitment to go ahead or drop it. It will be a beneficial operation whichever way it goes. It has created more public debate on schools and the content of education than has ever taken place before. That can't help but be good."

W. E. Campbell, Virginia's state superintendent of public instruction, supports minimum competency testing.

"Public education needs something to restore public confidence," Campbell said. "Public education is almost pricing itself out of business in many localities. I think if the people involved in public education will recognize the values inherent in competency-based education, we will restore public education to the eminence which it should enjoy.

"Unfortunately, I do not believe the organized teachers associations have recognized this fact. I am not talking about the organizations of teachers only but principals, supervisors, superintendents, and so on. They show indications of still not fully understanding the seriousness of the situation with respect to the American public. I think we had better recognize the seriousness of the situation and give our full attention to the teaching-learning situation.

"I don't know of any other way in which we are going to have evidence that young people finishing our schools possess the necessary knowledge and skills to live a happy and successful life and contribute to the betterment of society. We've got a golden opportunity. I hope we don't drop the ball."

North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt has been a major force behind the adoption of a competency testing program in his state.

"Our decision was that we ought not to let any more students graduate without minimum competency," Hunt said. "I think the diploma today without skills really doesn't do much good.

"We are identifying weaknesses. We are then going to remediate these weaknesses. It may be a little tough on the eleventh-graders this year but it is better to find their weaknesses now than to perpetrate a fraud . . . .

"I am prepared to ask for whatever (remedial funding) we really need. I am talking about focusing money directly on the students who do not pass the test. If I did not believe we could remediate, I would not be in favor of the tests."

Arthur Hertz, a Miami businessman who heads the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's new education quality action committee, strongly endorses the testing approach.

"It (the quality of education) has gotten to the point where business people have to take some action," he said. "We are getting a very poor product."

Ken Robinson, a parent and vice chairman of the Dade County (Miami) school system's community citizens advisory committee, said, "I think it is sensational. Nothing should be done to water down the effectiveness of the test. I don't think a child should be able to graduate without being able to function in the world."

The Florida testing program "is working out very well," said Mrs. Barbara Check, recording secretary with the Dade County PTA Council.

"In the past the high school graduation certificate didn't mean much and now we are asking not only the students to be accountable but the teachers as well."

Scott D. Thomson, deputy executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, thinks the shift to minimum competency testing looks like a bigger change now than it will in retrospect.

"It's not going to require that much in the way of resources and manpower in the long run," Thomson said.

"That's why I say I think in five years people are going to say in retrospect, 'What was all the shouting about? We are doing it. The kids are by and

large passing the tests. They are going to remedial classes. Sure we have had to hire another remedial teacher but that wasn't that big a deal'."

James Gallagher of the Frank Porter Graham Center, a multi-disciplinary child research center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and head of the North Carolina Minimum Competency Testing Commission says, "We are talking about competency testing as if somehow it is some odd animal that has come out of the woods and there is nothing like it in education," he said.

"The truth of the matter is there is hardly anthing it is more like than most of the education decision making that is done."

A National School Boards Association survey in 1978 showed that 76% of school board presidents think every public school student should be required to master certain skills and 76% believe every student should be required to pass a minimum competency test in order to receive a high school diploma.

A majority of the board presidents oppose any nationwide, federally devised test and believe that control of testing should remain at the local level, the survey showed.

Teachers and Teacher Organizations Respond

New York State United Teachers (AFT) has endorsed the concept of students demonstrating minimum levels of proficiency and has said that "adequately developed" basic competency tests are effective means of determining the minimum levels of achievement obtained.

The teachers union has called for funding of remediation programs and opposes the use of test results and statistics as the measure of school effectiveness.

New York Educators Association (NEA), has "agreed there should be standards but where they should be set is another story," said Ms. Pat Orrange, the state association's coordinator of professional services.

"There isn't enough money (provided) for remediation for the youngsters," she said. "We firmly believe that remediation can't begin in the ninth grade. We are against it (minimum competency testing) if the state or district has not provided remedial instruction. What we are saying is the bucks better be there."

The Tennessee Education Association has called for an overall plan to improve proficiency in basic skills before students graduate from high school but opposes any plan that would deny a high school diploma to a student on the basis of performance on a single proficiency test.

A TEA official said the state board of education's plan for minimal competency testing is a "dangerously oversimplistic proposal to solve a very complex problem."

The Florida Education Association/United (AFT) has criticized aspects of Florida's testing approach and has supported a delay in implementing the required examination.

However, Eileen H. Arpke, an Okaloosa County English teacher and president of the Florida Council for Teachers of English, has endorsed the testing program as "the most constructive and educationally supportive move toward an educated populace that we have had in 20 years."

During a state task force hearing in Panama City, Arpke said, "Graduation from high school should mean that the basic keys to knowledge are in the hands of the graduate for whatever purpose he wishes to use them. Every prospective employer, upper-level academic institution, and student should be fully aware of the skill levels guaranteed by the successful completion of high school and award of the diploma.

"We as educators are less than honest to award a diploma or promote a child who has not mastered the basic skills for each grade level."

Jean Dyson, a twelfth-grade English teacher at John F. Kennedy High School in Richmond, Virginia, has mixed feelings about minimum competency tests.

"It gives us a focus," she said. "We know specifically some of the goals we should be preparing students to reach. It has motivated the students, given them goals, uniform goals for all of our schools.

"But it is causing us to spend so much time preparing students for the test. There is constant interference with scheduling."

Marianna Minter, another English teacher at the school, said, "We haven't had a checkpoint at the tenth-grade level. Without it, the entire burden falls on the twelfth-grade teachers for remediation. For some students who missed some experiences in the past, we had to prepare them strenuously for the competency test and we missed a lot of other things that are important."

Virginia Lewis, head of the school's English department, said, "All of us have mixed feelings. There will be some good outcomes. It has some limitations. I know that one test will never be able to accurately assess a student."

The School Scene

Principals tend to support minimum competency testing while teachers and students express mixed feelings.

Harold Knott, principal of Miami's Killian High School, said, "It is definitely making young people aware of the fact they have got to learn some basic skills in order to get a diploma. I believe we see considerably more effort and work on the part of students to learn."

Richard M. Jewell, principal of Broughton High School in Raleigh, North Carolina, said an emphasis on basic skills has to start somewhere. "I think as a whole teachers, the community, everyone realizes that we have got to get back to the basics, the standards."

Mike Conley, principal at Leon High School in Tallahassee, praises the state's testing program but he also sees a few problems. "We like it," he said. "It has created a little more serious attitude among students toward school work. They are sort of under the gun. But there have been problems. There was not enough lead time in preparation for the students. The eleventh-grade class is the one suffering.

"We had the twelfth or thirteenth highest score in the state. It is not as big a problem to us as at other schools which have a different socio-economic background. The test itself is comparatively easy. My only concern is that so many students walk out and say this is ridiculous, it's so easy."

J. W. Bailey, assistant principal at Rickards High in Tallahassee, said the school's teachers are supportive of the tests. "It is not an unreasonable thing to ask kids to be able to do. From an administrative standpoint, it gives us the first toehold to try to make sure of some minimum performance of students after they leave here. It gives us something to shoot for."

Herman Carter, principal of John F. Kennedy High School in Richmond, Virginia, said students have taken a mature approach to competency testing. "They are not rebelling against it," he said. "They missed something somewhere and have accepted that fact and are trying to do something about it."

Randy Godsel, a senior at Mosley High School in Bay County (Panama City), Florida, exemplified the frustration of some students as he testified before a state task force in Florida. "There is too much time span between remedial work and taking the test again," Randy said. "To be a senior in high school and know you may not get your diploma . . . . When you have to live with something all summer, it is bad. You have your parents onto you all the time." He was almost in tears. Maurice Thomas, 18, a student at Bay

County's Rutherford High School, said he had "been hitting the books day and night" in an effort to pass the test. "I am a senior with 12 years of school and there is a question of whether I am going to pass or not," he said. "I am under pressure as a student. I think the pressure ought to be on the teachers." At one point in his elementary years, Maurice was incorrectly placed in a special education class.

Joyce Young, 17, a senior at Leon High School in Tallahassee who passed the test, said, "I thought it was a waste of time. It was on a low level. I feel you need a higher grade of education than that to graduate from high school."

However, Rebecca Macon, 16, a Leon High junior, said, "I feel it is unfair because really it is a surprise to eleventh-graders. For the basic students in the basic classes, it really is a big problem to cope with the test.

"Since the test has come up, I think a lot of kids are dropping out of school because they know they are going to fail it. If you go to school for 12 years and they are not going to give you a diploma, just a certificate, I don't think that is right. I have been too many years in school for them just to give me a certificate telling me how many days I have been in school."

At John F. Kennedy High in Richmond, Michael Newly, 15, a junior, said, "The diploma means more so I am glad."

Karl Golding, 17, a junior, had a similar viewpoint. "I like to know where I stand in my grades and knowledge."

Andrea Miles, 17, and Elizabeth Pankey, 17, said preparation for the test is taking too much time away from their other classwork.

And Lisa Bomar, 17, a senior, said, "It makes me think about what the system is about. You have to go 12 years and then you have to take a test. I have been here for 12 years and have got to take the test. The 12 years were for nothing really. It looks like the system is flawed somewhere."

The Federal Scene

Some members of Congress have called for nationwide testing. However, administration officials strongly believe that education is essentially a state and local function and that it would be an unwise expansion of federal influence to establish a national testing program.

However, Congress did include in the renewed Elementary and Secondary Education Act an authorization for the U.S. Commissioner of Education to make grants to states or local school systems if they desire to develop educational proficiency standards.

A state may apply for a grant or local school systems may apply in states where the state does not submit an application.

One of the requirements of the law is that assurances must be made that any students failing any examinations under the plan must be provided additional instruction in the subject area failed.

Grants may also be made to state and local educational agencies to assist in development of achievement testing in basic skills.

The National Institute of Education is planning a four-year study on the impact of minimum competency testing programs.

Conclusion

The major strength of minimum competency testing programs to this point appears to be the identification of specific learning objectives for students, particularly in elementary grades.

The effect of high school graduation tests is unclear. However, it appears that legal and political considerations likely will prevent any massive denial of high school diplomas based on competency test scores.

The full impact upon education is still clouded in uncertainty. One of the major questions is whether an emphasis on basic skills and competency testing will provide improved education for marginal and below-average students without limiting the variety and depth of instruction for higher achieving students.

So far, neither the worst fears of minimum competency testing critics nor the highest hopes of testing supporters have become reality.

Richard Hinds, consultant for measurement and evaluation for the Dade County, Florida, school system, has some of the mixed feelings expressed by many about minimum competency testing.

He thinks the Florida graduation test should probably have been administered for two years before being made a requirement.

"The state department and everybody else thinks it (the test) was brought down by Moses. It wasn't. A lot of people take test scores very seriously. I am afraid probably that the public takes the scores more seriously than they should and teachers take the scores less seriously than they should.

"I think in the long run the effect is going to be beneficial. In the long haul, American education will accommodate this program just as it has other practices."